

LAYING DOWN: FROM FAULKNER TO FRANCO

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William Faulkner titled his 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying*, not *As I Lie Dying*—the verb choice prophetically informs us of the theme of the story. “To lie” is intransitive. The verb itself implies no destination or direct object, but rather means to rest, or to recline. “To lay” is the receiving of an action—passive, implying a process of laying down. In this case, “to lay” is the very inevitable process of dying rather than the moment of death. Faulkner hands us the novel in 59 individual sections, each voiced by one of 15 characters in a stream-of-consciousness style. The chapters are told by members of the Bundren family (and a few neighbors and others) as they prepare for and observe the gradual death of the family’s matriarch, Addie. Faulkner constructs each chapter as a vignette based on the language of each character, reflected as a continuous flow of emotions, psychological thoughts, and reactions rather than as one central, progressing plot. These glimpses into the internal lives of each character allow identity to be presented through a specific perspective and carefully crafted language rather than as bases for a scene of action.

The form of the book asks us to consider the process of dying, a consideration Faulkner proves is not exclusive to those who will die soon, but that concerns all humans as they live their lives. As each vignette touches the psychological depths of an individual, we see the progression towards death not only for Addie, but also through the human responses of each character—their awareness that we are destined for death, and their urge to try to understand death. Thus we search for an answer to the question: who is the “I” in *As I Lay Dying*? It is easy to say that it is Addie, but in some ways, aren’t we all laying down to die?

The superficial notion that ‘we are all going to die someday’ is not the message Faulkner aims to convey. Rather, he asks us to consider death as a slow process: a concept that only humans understand to be transitive rather

than intransitive, a notion that asks us to employ a hyper-awareness of ourselves, our flaws, and our minds. Stream-of-consciousness eliminates the traditional steps of a plot: a conflict, call to action, climax, and denouement. Such a style is difficult to portray on camera, and for this reason *As I Lay Dying* has been widely considered to be “unfilmable.” Thus, when actor and director James Franco translated William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* to film, the literary world placed immense pressure on him to preserve Faulkner’s distinctive, emotionally and psychologically reactive voice. While Faulkner relies on language, Franco’s medium inherently inhibits him from directly translating each and every one of Faulkner’s words. Ultimately, Franco makes an effort to preserve the “telling” vignettes by quoting Faulkner directly, accompanying the words with visual messaging designed to portray and reflect the emotional essence of the text. Do these filmic elements accurately translate Faulkner’s sentiment to screen?

Franco effectively does make the translation halfway through *As I Lay Dying*. Shortly after Addie’s death, in one of the most quoted sections of Faulkner’s novel, Vardaman Bundren, the youngest child of the family, learns of his mother’s passing. Franco’s camera is divided into two side-by-side frames, causing the scene to be shot physically from two angles. Stylistically, this split screen presents viewers with multiple perspectives of one event, elongating it to allow the viewer more time for contemplation. Franco begins with two shots of rippling water. The left frame bears the blurry outline of Vardaman’s head—reflecting his confusion, his sense of being lost. The right frame quickly changes to show the blond-haired young Vardaman, dressed in blue overalls with his brown sleeves rolled up and his arms crossed at his chest. The camera of the left frame moves to show a close-up view of Vardaman’s face, which looks distraught, distant, and almost angry as we watch his eyes travel back and forth in contemplation, trying to grapple with death. After Vardaman blinks a few times, he stares directly towards the camera, speaking quietly and matter-of-factly: “[m]y mother is a fish” (Faulkner 84; *As I Lay Dying* 0:22:50). The camera is subtly out of focus. The depth of field makes the edges of Vardaman’s face soft, but quickly comes into crisp focus on his blue eyes. The camera lingers on his facial expression, which fills up the whole frame and shows Vardaman as frightened and vulnerable. Although in the book this “scene” is only one sentence long, Franco visually

preserves the simplicity that Faulkner's chapter creates in its written form. However, unlike Faulkner, Franco is far less subtle in his message: he guides the viewers to understanding that the simplicity of the statement stems from Vardaman's inability to understand death due to his young age and innocence.

This scene connects back to a scene earlier in the film, when Vardaman has his first experience with death. Anse, his father, asks him to gut a large fish. Vardaman describes: "[the fish] is cut up into pieces of not-fish now" (Faulkner 53). He simply adds the word "not" in front of the word "fish" to inform us that it no longer exists. Franco enhances this experience for the viewer by visually showing us the disgusting and traumatizing process of gutting a fish; Vardaman returns with a grimace on his face, covered in blood. Thus in showing the blood and Vardaman's horrified reaction, Franco foretells Addie's death and visually draws the connection between Vardaman's first experience with death and his mother's death. More easily than readers of the book, viewers of the film observe Vardaman's fish as an image of death. Vardaman concludes that his mother is a fish, for the fish is the only face he can put to death.

This section of the book is extremely haunting in that Vardaman's conclusion is just five words on an entire page. Textually, the negative space on the page seems abrupt and cold compared to the flow of the other vignettes. Visually, the film frame seems just as simple but leaves a more jarring sense; Franco focuses on Vardaman's facial expressions to depict the series of emotions he experiences in attempting to understand what is impossible for a child to comprehend. One line on the page makes up two minutes of film-time, a prolonged moment that allows us to stare directly into Vardaman's eyes and feel his pain and confusion. This eye-contact connects us with the character and we see him as a vulnerable child in the process of losing his mother, a loss so painful we remember that we all, one day, must die. Stylistically, both the film and the book reveal a harshness in understanding the death of a loved one, particularly a mother to a child.

Although Vardaman simply associates death with his fish, Franco and Faulkner reveal to us a consciousness in Vardaman that is incredibly human. Vardaman, although young, may not understand death as an adult would, but he understands its impact. Scientifically, many researchers have focused on

examining children's attitudes towards death. Researcher Maria Nagy collected data in the form of children's drawings and compositions, finding that, statistically, a child's perception of death is dependent on his stage of development. She concluded that only after the age of nine does the child understand that death is the "cessation of corporeal life" (Childers and Wimmer 1299). Considering this study, Vardaman probably does not understand that his mother was no longer living; however, he is aware of the loss of his mother and the new void in his family. For Vardaman and other young children, whether they understand corporeal life or not is irrelevant; they still have the ability to understand loss and the implications of death. To be aware of voids and feel our own emptiness is a big part of human consciousness—we all understand that life ends in death. Thus humans, in general, are given the ability to question existence, and so we ask how we should live our lives, knowing we all must die in the future.

Faulkner suggests, through his characters, that this existential awareness is the process of dying itself—which, paradoxically, is a process of living. Addie is physically dying, while also struggling to understand her existence before she dies. Although she is the person of central interest in Faulkner's story, Addie only speaks once in the entirety of the novel. She states, "I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (169). But before Addie feels "ready" to die, she must find completeness in "being." Like Vardaman, Addie understands the impact of death and speaks of it in a chilling way—the two both associate it with other objects. Vardaman chooses a fish, because as a child, he understands that fish can die. Addie, on the other hand, associates her death with a sense of incompleteness in her life. She likens her "being" to a "jar," "vessel," and "empty door frame," objects that all, unlike a fish, imply a deeper understanding of existence. These words invoke sexual connotations, especially when Addie states that her husband, Anse, would "liquify and flow into it"—the "it" not only refers to the jar, vessel, and empty door frame, but also to her "being": her preparation for death and her life (173). She continues to search for words to describe "it"—stating, "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*" (173). Faulkner leaves a literal gap in the sentence—a noticeable space on the page—as if Addie cannot find a word to

describe her sexuality, her identity, or her past transgressions. In many ways, she cannot find a word because she does not know her reason for living and existing, a reason which is supposed to prepare her for death.

Franco emphasizes this critical passage in the text by inserting it directly after the most chaotic scene of the film. Franco shows the Bundren family physically struggling to carry Addie's coffin across a rushing river in a horse-pulled wagon. He again uses a split screen to show multiple aspects of the chaos unfolding—we watch a log rushing quickly down the river and strike the leg of the horse, which whinnies in pain. We see the horse bob up and down in the water, the camera shaking as if we are in the river as well. As we watch the cart flip 90-degrees onto its side, Franco zooms in on his characters, who are straining to hold on to the coffin and for their lives. Darl, the second oldest Bundren child, jumps from the wagon, leaving Cash, the eldest, straining in pain. Cash's eyes squint and his face turns red. He clings to the overturned cart, trying to hold on to Addie's coffin. His limbs are shaking from the weight, and when he finally loses his grip, he falls into the river, snapping every bone in his leg. Franco shows Cash scream and, ultimately, pass out in pain. The camera fades to black as Cash loses consciousness.

In this section of the film, Franco's use of the split screen allows him to show the physical chaos, immense physical strain, and emotional desperation of the scene. This scene—an anxiety-producing six minutes—is portrayed as the climax of the film. However, in the book, this section takes up only two pages. Perhaps Franco enhances this moment because the movie genre calls for a climax—the action prepares us for the heavy emotional tone of Addie's following passage.

Franco interrupts the chaos and abandons his split-screen method for a slow and stylistically simple shot as Addie begins to speak. The camera shakes slightly, undulating with the waves so that the viewer partakes in an eerie sense of peace resuming after chaos. Addie's voice parallels this undulation; she sounds equally eerie, but to the point of her words being indecipherable. Franco then switches to another shot—still slightly shaking back and forth—that zooms into Addie's face resting on a pillow. The shot is so closely cropped that we cannot tell where she is—whether it is before she dies, or in the coffin where she lays dead. This ambiguity allows us to focus on her face in a similar way we do on Vardaman's.

As Addie speaks her one line in the background, Franco shoots the coffin moving down the river. As the directly quoted monologue approaches Faulkner's gap in the sentence, Franco is confronted with the decision on how to address the omitted word and create the same void that is on Faulkner's page. Franco chooses to show an image of a calm river in place of the gap, panning over still, deep green water which takes up the entire frame. Addie does not speak at this moment—her silence implying the space—and the moment feels still and empty, especially after the violence and trauma of the scene prior. By choosing the calm, green river as a filmic parallel of Faulkner's gap, Franco upholds Faulkner's intentions: the river keeps flowing. Its passage is inevitable, much like time: the progression towards death. While Addie cannot find a word to fill the gap, the river tells us that it is irrelevant whether or not she can—she will never feel content with her passage towards death, although the progression is inevitable, just like the river's flow. Likewise, Vardaman understands death as crushingly inevitable, as he feels the loss of the fish and his mother.

While in completely different stages of their lives, both Addie and Vardaman examine death from the same standpoint: it is sadly unsatisfying, whether we find the words to understand it or not. The tone of Vardaman and Addie's vignettes is not unique. Franco's use of violent and traumatizing imagery serves to produce anxiety in his viewers. He colors Vardaman with blood and shows the intricacies of his pained facial expressions. Franco lets us observe and hear the disaster in the river scene—the extreme pain and sacrifice of Cash's leg breaking in front of our own eyes. His visuals are heart-wrenchingly sad and gruesomely explicit, to the point that we feel the intensity of the characters' pain. From Cash getting his leg amputated from injury, to Vardaman using a screwdriver to bore holes into the top of Addie's full coffin, to the only Bundren daughter Dewey Dell being graphically raped in exchange for an abortion, the intensity of Franco's visual messaging shows us that *As I Lay Dying* is in no way watered down for a movie audience. Rather, we are confronted with a combination of Faulkner's beautiful and careful words and Franco's heavy, anxiety-producing, and horrifyingly graphic filmic style. We are presented with a series of intense vignettes—far less abstract and obscure than in the novel—in order to provoke emotional intensity in the viewer. But like readers of the book, we walk away from the film pondering

what it means to live and die and whether or not there is a way to prepare ourselves for death.

Perhaps satisfaction is impossible in both Franco's film and Faulkner's book. Both confront and shock us with a truth: we are all preparing to die. The title of the work, however, provides more hope than the content of the film and book themselves. As we prepare to die, we are living, in the process of growing old before death. The concept of "laying" is not gruesome, but peaceful, like the still green water Franco shows us or the calm, white negative space of Faulkner's page; it reminds us to pause before we leave. It is in the pauses that we find the beauty and essence of living.

William Faulkner drew his title from Homer's *The Odyssey*, an ancient Greek poem centered around the Greek hero Odysseus and his journey home after the fall of Troy. After the 10-year Trojan War, Odysseus calls out to the souls of the dead. King Agamemnon appears in front of him. Murdered by Aegisthus, the lover of his wife, Agamemnon says: "[a]s I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyes as I descended into Hades" (qtd. in Polk 266). The image of a man falling into the underworld with his eyes open recalls Faulkner and Franco's stories. Through Faulkner's artistically crafted words and gaps, and through Franco's anxiety-producing, eerily graphic and contrastingly calm filmic elements, we are asked to open our eyes as we die. But we are also asked to watch the world around us as we live, for humans are unique in that we are aware of and sensitive to the concepts of life and death. We have the ability to open our eyes as we lay to rest.

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