

The River Scene in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and the Postmodernist Myth of the Center: Intertextuality and Linguistic Experimentation

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Abstract

Trying to cross a flooding river with the coffin of their dead mother, the Bundrens struggle to keep connected to a dead mother's coffin. To keep hold of their mother's corpse, most of the Bundren's grip a rope tied to them. This image is reminiscent of the umbilical rope that connects a living mother to a not-yet living baby in her womb. In the river scene, this picture is ironically redrawn to portray living children connected to a non-living mother in a tomb. This scene is of paramount importance in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) insofar as it inscribes the novel into a postmodernist theory that defies demystifying notions of centrality or grand narratives of absolute truth and ultimate meanings. The river scene testifies to the credibility of a postmodernist argument about the myth of the Center. Such a decisive claim rests upon a new philosophy that signals the end and the "mythification" of any grand narrative of absolute truth, coherence, and linearity.

Key Words: Myth, politics, poetics, postmodernism, center, intertextuality, linguistic experimentation

Myth: from Politics to Poetics

The term myth derives from the Greek word "mythos," meaning a story. Myth, like all stories, is an endeavor to give meaning to human existence. In *Myth and Literature*, William Righter states: "'myth' is, at varying levels of consciousness and degrees of articulateness, a way of describing the foundations of social behavior" (10). Myths are socially, culturally and ethically established to instruct and guide members of society by introducing models and conventions. In "The Necessity of Myth," Mark Schorer defines myth as the instrument by which means we persistently struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves: "A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience" (355). Accordingly, without myth, experience is chaotic, incomplete, and futile.

Likewise, Rollo May, in *The Cry for Myth*, describes the term as a way of making sense in a "senseless" world, for "myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence" (15). In *Mapping Myths of Biblical Interpretation*, Richard Walsh defines myth as a "sacred story" (9). Defined cross-culturally, the sacred is an empowering structuring element. Correspondingly, a myth "[...] gestures at power in [its] function as well as [its] content" (10). Similarly, in *Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order*, Stephen Ausband argues that the primary aim of myth is to reinforce order, for it is "[a tale] which demonstrates the order that a man or a society perceives in natural phenomena" (2). Ausband explains that the main aim of mythology lies in creating the illusion of a coherent meaningful reality governed by linearity and order (2).

In the same vein, in *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss presents myth as a strongly structured story constituting a major part of society, and revealing the workings of the human mind as conditioned by the inner workings of social norms (138). Lévi-Strauss argues that every culture organizes knowledge into "binary opposite pairs" which form the basic structure for all ideas and concepts. In every binary pair, one element is favored and valued and the other is disfavored and abnegated. For instance, "good" is better than "evil," "light" is better than "dark," and "cooked" is better than "raw." Therefore, from a socio-cultural perspective, myth is a governing force that gives meaning, shape, and order to human experience. Similarly, in psychoanalytical theory, myth is considered as an element of power and authority. According to psychoanalyst Carl Jung, the human unconscious is divided into two parts. One part is very personal and the other is collective, as it is the same for all humans. This latter part, called "collective unconscious," does not come from personal experience.

It is rather inherited by all humans. Jung states: “Myths are born out of the collective unconscious,” (39) or what Sigmund Freud calls the “archaic heritage.” Jung stresses the paramount importance of myth in defining and determining the human psyche, pointing out that myths constitute an inherited part of the human psyche, “a fundamental driving force, a container of great truths and the only trustworthy ground to self-realization” (35). Accordingly, being a reflection of a “collective unconscious” and a shared psychological basis for all humans, myth constitutes an undeniable source of truth, power, and authority.

In postmodernist theory, however, myth takes another dimension. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Frederick Nietzsche sets up the rudiments of a postmodernist conception of myth, stating: “Western world had been drifting slowly toward the destruction of its narrative resources” (135). Nietzsche describes this process of destruction as a kind of “Mythoclasm”¹ upon which a postmodernist mythoclast poetics of is ironically established. It is against mythology’s attempt to establish authoritative meaning, order and linearity that postmodernism arose. With its political and social idiosyncrasies, postmodernism gave a new definition to myth. Closely associated with order, power and coherence in socio cultural and psychoanalytical theories, myth in the postmodernist perspective becomes synonymous with an authoritative grand narrative that is speaker-biased, obscuring truth under the rigidity and authority of sociopolitical agendas.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes sees in myth an authoritative narrative which “has [...] a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and imposes it on us” (115). The role of postmodernist criticism, Barthes argues, remains the difficult theoretical labor of demonstrating why myth is a kind of a social lie, for “to see the world through the prism of myth is akin of having one’s head buried in the sand” (Elliott 68). Barthes remarks that, classically, the notion of myth hides a particular process whereby historically and ideologically determined circumstances are presented as somehow normal. The postmodernist project, Barthes insists, ought to uncover the ideological abuse hidden in the display of what is taken for granted. He states, “I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of What-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse, which in my view, is hidden there” (11). Accordingly, the postmodernist theory starts a Nietzschean “mythoclastic” project of censoring any conventionally established myth claiming singularity, uniqueness and centrality. Postmodernism sees myth as any claim to absolute truth and power and overtly calls for the necessity of declaring its end.

In postmodernist theory, different voices pronounce the end of myth in the classical sense of the term. In fact, Frederic Jameson’s statement about the death of the myth of the individual subject (167) intersects with Jean François Lyotard’s assertion that “we no longer have recourse to the grand narrative. [...] The grand narrative has lost its credibility” (76). Moreover, in “The Death of Author,” Roland Barthes’s focuses on the end of the myth of the “Author” as a controlling force in a narrative (150), going in tandem with Michel Foucault who declares the end of the myth of “the king.” In the same spirit, Linda Hutcheon asserts the end of the myth of the novel as a classical convention of literature (2), and meets Jacques Derrida’s mythoclastic argument about “the myth of the center” (224). These claims constitute a postmodernist pronouncement about the end of myth and its claimed autonomous, universal, unitary and coherent “grand narrative.”

The River Scene in William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying and the Myth of the Center:

The River Scene in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* testifies to the postmodernist assertion about the myth of the center. Trying to cross the river with the coffin of their dead mother, the Bundrens undergo a strenuous quest. They struggle against the violent currents to keep connected to a dead mother’s coffin. To keep control of the dead mother’s coffin, most of the Bundrens grip a rope tied to them. This image is reminiscent of the umbilical cord that connects a living mother to a not yet-living baby in her womb. In the river scene, this picture is ironically reworked to portray living children connected to their no longer-living mother. This is the key scene to understanding of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* insofar as it inscribes the novel into a postmodernist theory that defies any demystifying notion of centrality or any grand narrative of absolute truth and ultimate meaning.

The river scene testifies to the credibility of the Derridean statement about the myth of the center, for Addie Bundren is a center around which her family’s journey revolves. However, this center is dead and the Bundren’s attempt to cling to it turns out to be a failure.

¹ Mythoclasm is the act of viewing myth negatively and the attempt to eliminate it. Postmodern theory is idiosyncratically mythoclast insofar as it critically revisits myth considering it as a grand narrative that is no longer credible.

Addie Bundren's death, or the myth of the center, is stylistically echoed in *As I Lay Dying* through Faulkner's employment of postmodernist narrative idiosyncrasies that exhibit an ironic standpoint about myths of narrative coherence, singularity, and unity. Among numerous postmodernist narrative peculiarities the present paper focuses on intertextuality and linguistic experimentation.

Intertextuality:

The postmodernist literary text deploys intertextuality as a reaction to the grand narrative of singularity, totality, and coherence. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson talks about the "end of style in the sense of the unique and personal" (319). To him, the end of the "individual" subject and the growing unavailability of the personal style engender the universal practice of pastiche or intertextuality (320). Faulkner's predilection toward eclecticism and intertextuality is evident in the novels' title. Indeed, *As I Lay Dying* with its nine-day journey echoes Homer's *The Odyssey* with its dominant image of the ten-year journey of wandering and endurance. In book XI of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus makes a journey in the underworld of the dead and meets Agamemnon, who starts his tale with the statement: "As I lay dying with a sword in my chest [...] and would not shut my eyes or close my lips. I was going to Death" (170).

Likewise, in George Peele's classical *The Famous Chronicle of King Edward I* (1593), Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* may have been readily mapped out. Edward I, king of England, made a journey from the North of England to London with the corpse of his wife (Ousby 318). Cleanth Brooks states that the writer tries to elevate and venerate the Bundrens' funeral journey by associating it with the funeral of a king's wife and turning the Bundrens' act into a noble heroic endeavor (143). Irving Howe focuses on the comic effect of the journey to highlight Faulkner's criticism of modern Man's decaying portrait (182). However, seen from a postmodernist perspective, the title, *As I Lay Dying*, demonstrates Faulkner's eclectic tendency toward establishing the consciously plural pastiche genre² built upon intertextuality or the co-presence of different texts within the borders of a single text. Accordingly, being constructed upon other texts, Faulkner's novel fits Roland Barthes definition of the postmodernist text as an "intertext [...], a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, and fragments of social languages" (39), that strives to destroy the myth of the individual text of coherence, unity, and singularity.

Besides, the eclectic aspect of Faulkner's text is overtly established through the thematic presence of major romantic poets like William Wordsworth and William. Indeed, the move from Vardaman's section full of spontaneity and innocence, as in the reiterated instance: "My mother is a fish" (76-90-91-185), to Darl's intricate monologues, is a replication of a major Faulknerian theme, namely "the transition from childhood to adulthood" (Morris 134) or from the Blakean 'Songs of Innocence' to 'Songs of Experience.'³

In his analysis of *As I Lay Dying*, David Howe states that the writer "is able to blend extreme and incongruous effects: the sublime and the trivial, anguish and absurdity, [...] a human tragedy and a country farce. The marvel is that to be one, it had to be the other" (191). In a postmodernist practice, Faulkner's approach to genres is eclectic, for he "relies on multiple perspectives to tell a story without an authoritative version" (Lookyer 73). He deliberately combines the grotesqueness of Addie's rotten corpse and the heroic act of her burial among her people in Jefferson, the comic Cora who depends much on her chickens and the pathetic Anse who is words more than deeds, and pity of Vardaman who lost his mother and cannot linguistically grasp such a loss and the terror of a flooding river and blazing fires. In so doing, Faulkner produces a text that exhibits "a complexity of tone that proves difficult for some readers to cope with" (Brooks 141).

² The term "pastiche" derives from the Italian *pasticcio*, meaning different ingredients. In "Postmodernism and Lifestyles," Nigel Watson accounts for the predilection for a pastiche performance within the postmodernist narrative structure: "Postmodernism is rather a glib way of saying flexibility; of saying that hierarchies aren't what they used to be, that you can mix and match different hierarchies of culture" (54). Within the classical tradition, the pastiche style is primarily used for the purpose of parody. However, within the postmodernist suggestion pastiche proceeds from a dominant apocalyptic 'sense of an ending' insofar as pastiching a text originates from the frustration that everything has been done before (Sim 125). In this vein, Frederic Jameson, in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," observes that "the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds [. . .] only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already" (Jameson 167).

³ For a more detailed analysis about Faulkner the poet, see Cleanth Brooks' "The Odyssey of the Bundrens" in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. Louisiana: Yale University Press, 1963. 141-66.

The different tones of the novel demonstrate the writer's openness to a variety of genres that coexist in both texts resulting in a postmodernist narrative practice of intertextuality and pluralism.⁴

In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science," Jacques Derrida writes that "structure [...] has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin" (223), that it becomes a requirement to begin thinking that there is no center and that this center "is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (224). Derrida announces a postmodernist "event" which has occurred in the history of the concept of structure. Derrida's claim that "the center is not the center" (224) anymore actually initiates the postmodernist "event" in the literary text. The pastiche genre, established on the narrative technique of intertextuality, is in this sense the "event" that signals the decentering of the narrative structure, the end of the center, or the end of the myth of individualism and private style and the birth of "margins and edges [...] and [t]he 'ex-centric' as both off-center and decentered" (Hutcheon 130). Therefore, intertextuality becomes a valorization of the different and the plural in opposition to the myth of uniformity and singularity in classical narratives.

In *The Ink of Melancholy*, André Bleikasten describes the Faulknerian text as "a space in which novels are endlessly born out of novels" (42). Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is a plural text insofar as it is the product of different styles and voices. It is a text based upon the postmodernist practice of intertextuality, for the Bundrens' funeral journey can arguably be read as a diary, an epic poem, a road story, a folktale, and an adventure novel. While the Bundrens' trip introduces the reader to an American South on the verge of postmodernity with its cars, road signs, and drug stores, Faulkner's text exposes the readers to different literary styles which are recycled in new contexts of advertising and experimenting with narrative and linguistic models.

In the same vein, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida reject the idea that "history is knowable through any single narrative account which will inevitably reduce an irreducible difference to a single center" (Currie 87). The pastiche genre, constructed upon intertextuality, becomes a space of "bricolage" and the postmodernist writer turns into a playful framer who "uses the means at hand, that is the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, [...] not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary or try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous" (Derrida 231). Constructing his text on the narrative technique of intertextuality, Faulkner becomes a bricoleur who follows a postmodernist narrative strategy that highlights diversification and voices difference and plurality over the authoritarian self-centered tradition of the grand narrative which becomes, in Derrida's words, "a myth" eliminated by the search for a new position of the discourse that abandons "all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute arche" (232). Faulkner's text, therefore, becomes a field of "free play" with genres and a field of ironic substitutions permitted by the lack, the myth or the absence of a center or origin.

Linguistic Experimentation:

Part of the postmodernist mythoclastic project is concerned with critically approaching the grand narrative of language as the only medium of representing reality. Hans Bertens evokes the myth of language in the structuralist belief, pointing out that "our language is so natural to us that it almost never occurs to us that maybe our confidence in language is misplaced" (121). Likewise, Jacques Derrida pronounces the end of the myth of the linguistic sign, regarding it as a fractured entity incapable of fully capturing the real meaning of words. He argues that language is intrinsically unreliable as words are always subject to change.

No sign is fully adequate, for every sign is written "under erasure," "*sous rapture*," a term Derrida coins to mark the myth of the sign as an unfailing medium of representation. Derrida claims that signs have no fixed meanings for their meanings depend on different contexts. All that signs can do is make us aware of what is lacking and what is silent. Correspondingly, the sign is a "trace" which needs to be absent and silent so as to reach its full meaning. This argument about the unreliability of language is readily noticed in Faulkner's novel. The presence of non-linguistic signs in *As I Lay Dying* is a postmodernist playful way that signals the end of the myth of language as the sole medium of representation and ascertains silence as a functional element in voicing meaning in the narratives.

⁴ Faulkner's employment of intertextuality connects with Mikhail Bakhtin's view of the dialogic. To Bakhtin, using an expression or a word from another text in his/her own text, a writer will engage in some kind of dialogue with the text in which he/she encountered the borrowed word or expression. The dialogic work engages in a constant dialogue with other works in literature so as to construct itself and be constructed by the previous work.


In “Fiction in America Today or the Unreality of Reality,” Raymond Federman describes postmodernist fiction as “an organism which functions outside any form of discourses and evolves in silence” (13). Silence is, indeed, established in *As I Lay Dying* through an abundant use of a punctuation signifying silence and a remarkable typography through which the reader is left with blank voiceless spaces:

Cash: It won't balance. If you want it to tote and ride on a balance, we will have-----

I'm telling you it won't tote and it won't ride on a balance unless-----

[...] If they want it to tote and ride on a balance, they will have ----- . (87)

Addie talks about her body before Anse: “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*” (161). Similarly, Vernon Tull, the Bundrens wealthy neighbor, talks about Addie's coffin:

“Cash made it clock-shape, like this with every joint and seam beveled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket” (80). The textual gaps and the coffin's pictogram create a kind of blankness inside the text, which is indicative of Faulkner's skeptical attitude toward the word. This critical standpoint is voiced by Addie Bundren who overtly claims that words are “just a shape to fill a lack” (160).

Through the employment of non-linguistic symbols in *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner reveals his challenge of the myth language as an efficacious medium to represent the abstract. Likewise, the writer's recurrence to “the language of symbols, which makes its appeal not to reason but to emotion and imagination” (Vickery 278) demonstrates his innovative way of approaching referential systems. Faulkner believes in non-linguistic symbols which are “created out of and operate through images which possess that concreteness in the verbal universe that objects and events have in the nonverbal” (278). Furthermore, non-linguistic symbols “are suggestive rather than definitive” (278). In this sense, they perfectly serve the postmodernist text in its effort to overcome the myth of linguistic uniqueness in representing reality and producing fixed truth toward openness, difference, and plurality of meaning:

The symbol provides an immediate and incommunicable verbal and aesthetic experience in the same way that the object or event provides an equally incommunicable nonverbal experience. Because the symbol cannot be confined within any single system or formula, it serves to free man's imagination and because it is evocative rather than definitive, it provides a verbal stimulus to that totality of human response which reason and logic destroy. (278-79). since it does not depend on logic but on intuitive comprehension, the language of symbols is the only medium common to all men, “to the lawyers and plantation owners as well as [. . .] ‘the doomed and lowly of the earth who have nothing else to read with but the heart’” (279). Therefore, from a postmodernist perspective, there is gain in the shift from the linguistic to the non-linguistic symbol insofar as the text becomes open to a popular culture marginalized by the myth of high art yet highlighted in the postmodernist project.

Interestingly, many of his characters reiterate Faulkner's belief that the myth of words, as a supreme medium of articulation, is no longer credible. For instance, in *Mosquitoes* (1927), Julius Kaufman, an art critic, describes Dowson Fairchild, a novelist, as “a funny [...] member of that species all of whose actions are controlled by words” (130). Words can be a kind of sterility that restraints the free flow of ideas, for “you start right to think in words. And the first thing you know, you don't have thoughts in your mind at all; you have just words in it” (210). Likewise, words rob the essence of things and deeds because, reproduced into words, “the thing or the deed becomes just a kind of shadow of a certain sound you make by making your mouth a certain way” (231). Accordingly, the medium of language should be held in distrust. Resorting to the nonverbal in the construction of his text, Faulkner stresses the end of the myth of language and the necessity of finding other mediums to contain the uncontainable and the unworded.

In *Discourse Figure*, Jean François Lyotard similarly talks about the necessity of considering the superiority of “figure” over the word, suggesting: “What is wanted is to have words *say* the preeminence of the figure, to *signify* the other of signification” (18). The postmodernist artist, Lyotard claims, needs to reconsider the linguistic field so that it can contain “figures” that cannot be confined to the authoritarian rules of language. By so doing, the postmodernist artist opens new possibilities of “new idioms” and “new significations” which remain unvoiced and unheard in classical theories of language. In *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard explains: A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. (81)

Lyotard's argument offers a better understanding of Faulkner's employment of the coffin's pictogram as a postmodernist narrative strategy allowing new possibilities of non-linguistic idioms and new spaces for the unvoiced to be revisited and voiced.

Lyotard adds that language is not made of signs only, pointing out that artists and philosophers fail to perceive a paramount side of reality as long as they remain confined to the classical order of signification. This is precisely what Addie Bundren, in *As I Lay Dying*, means when she says, "I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (159). Addie's critical view about language and the presence of visual signs reflect the postmodernist ironic attitude toward language as a mythified unique medium of articulation. In *Ordered by Words*, Judith Lockyer remarks: "Faulkner reminds us that words can trap and deceive. [. . .] The voices of Addie and Darl Bundren warn against belief in the absolute power of words" (73). In this vein, Addie's aspiration to "the dark land talking the voiceless speech" (163) in *as I lay Dying*, articulates postmodernist paradox of perfect communication through the nonverbal.

In *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard protests against classical structuralist assumptions about the literary text and claims "the given is not a text, that there is within it a density, or rather a constitutive difference, which is not to be read, but to be seen" (148). This difference, he adds, "and the immobile mobility which reveals it, is what is continually forgotten in the process of signification" (149). To Lyotard, "seeing" can be more functional than "saying" in the course of signification. He, therefore, rejects the structuralist or the "textualist approach which privileges texts and discourses over experience, the senses, and images" (149), and defends his claim of the senses and experience over linguistic abstractions and concepts. Opposing the myth of language as a prominent medium in the process of signification, Lyotard champions the "figure" or the image over linguistic abstract systems ascertaining that discourse is more abstract, rationalized, and conventional than the figure and, thus, attempts to redeem images, forms and, figures from their abnegation and devaluation by classical discourse theories.

In the same vein, literary theorist Raymond Federman classifies the postmodernist exaggerated employment of punctuation, typography, "figures" and visual material within the narcissistic, playful and self-reflexive aspect of the trend, seeing in this technical idiosyncrasy the postmodernist text's exhibition of visual self-reflexivity. Federman asserts:

Postmodern fiction [...] has evolved from a mere demystification of language as a trap in its relation with reality and history, to the conceptualization of a new type of text: a more self-conscious and self-reflexive text which constantly draws to its own medium, to its own progress. (14)

Postmodernist texts not only reflect upon their own movement toward construction, but also scrutinize the medium through which they are constructed, namely language: "It is no longer a question of representing, or explaining, or even justifying [...] reality, but a question of undermining the vehicle which expressed and represented that reality – that is to say language" (14). It is the myth of language as a supreme medium of representing reality that the postmodernist narrative tries to deconstruct, suggesting other nonverbal alternatives of representation and articulation.

Similarly, in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," Ihab Hassan states that the narrative conventions of "author, audience, reading, writing, book, genre [...] have all suddenly become questionable" (93) within a postmodernist project that valorizes the non-linguistic and the indeterminate at the expense of a classically overestimated linguistic system which "has become void [...] and therefore can only demonstrate its emptiness" (80). In a Nietzschean mythoclastic method, the postmodernist writer confronts his own writing and consciously enters his/her own text so as to question the very act of using language and so does William Faulkner in *As I lay Dying* when he escapes the myth of the singular text constructed upon the singular linguistic sign.

Conclusion:

From a political element maintaining power and order in socio cultural and psychoanalytical theories to an aesthetic narrative practice in the postmodernist literary text, myth plays different roles, yet its significance in human experience is paramount, for myth is invented and interpreted to give meaning and understanding to human existence. The river scene in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is a mythoclastic pronouncement of the death of the center in postmodernist narrative theory and practice. Intertextuality and linguistic experimentation are two narrative techniques built upon claims that critically revisit classical narrative practices, suggesting new narrative modes that highlight plurality and difference instead of classical myths of centrality and singularity.

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