As I Lay Dying: The Trauma Of Maternal Death

As I lay Dying" is a story that explores the Bundren family. The family underwent a traumatic experience that involved the death of the mater familias, Addie. Darl is the focus in the story; his demeanor and behavior ascribe him in the spotlight; his traumatic experience and schizophrenic condition make him unpopular in the family. The role of maternal death in 'As I Lay Dying' engendered the traumatic experience of the family members, particularly in the case of Darl, throughout the funeral march that the family undertook for the burial of her corpse.

Like in many literary texts (see, for instance, the Kafkian opus), post World War I (Gurevitz, 2016), Faulkner's "As I lay Dying" uses trauma as a representational model to articulate stories in a manner that resonates with the audience. The text dwells on the Bundren family and the journey they took when confronted with trauma. What is clear is that Faulkner writes the book with the audience in mind. He preys on the aspect of literary trauma to hook his audience to the text. In this case, the audience shares in the living text that tells the story of a traumatic experience shared by members of the Bundren family and how each member of the family reacts to it.

Memories that infused with trauma are, at times, very difficult to process, especially to those that experienced the memories directly (Janet, 1889). However, it is like these memories to exist partially in our minds. The memory of Addie is what drives the actions of all the family members throughout the march to bury Addie. The stories that exist in trauma many at times, speak out in the literature. It tells the stories that are most difficult to portray in mind. Caruth (1995) particularly refers to traumatic experiences faced by war veterans in Vietnam and other war-ridden nations, and the relation it has to post-traumatic stress disorder. The minds of the war veterans are filled with stories and memories of the traumatic experiences that took place, albeit partially. These memories can be conveyed in literary texts. This is because the literary language can convey important information that we may not have access to.

In the case of the Bundren family, the initial chapter of the book portrays the family to be one that bound together as one. The literary text preys on the initially jovial, yet very disturbed family. What is most disturbing is that, as Addie lays on her bed, the whole family expects her to die. This is the onset of the traumatic experience for the family (at least, as it is presented to the reader). It is even more tragic that Cash has already started building the casket in which they would lay their mother. This is with complete disregard for their mother, who was still alive then. Cash was building the casket right outside the window in which Addie lays. In the works of Caruth (1995), she points out that there was research conducted on the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder being pathological; indeed, this resonates with the Bundren family. At this point, disasters had not yet struck, but they knew it was on the way. The repressed feelings and anguish, coupled with questionable actions, was a recipe for the post-traumatic stress to be. The literature focuses on building up the mood towards the traumatic event from the incipit. Everything seems to be in the workings at this point.

What makes it an even more traumatic experience, both for the characters in the literary text and the readers, is that Addie knew her own end was approaching. However, the character of Darl comes into question, especially concerning how he deals with the build-up to the traumatic

experience. To this end, Darl and his brother Jewel leave their home to make a delivery to Vernon Tull. Indeed, this is oddly curious considering the state of their mother. Hence, Faulkner uses Darl in this case to highlight a common attribute that many people have. That is, running away from their troubles when the situation is unbearable. Darl may have done this unconsciously, or with prior knowledge, nevertheless, his actions are not justified. As they make their way out of town, he explicitly tells Jewel that by the time they come back home, their mother would be dead.

The modern-day term to describe Darl Bundren would be schizophrenic. Indeed, Darl, as appears from the novel, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. This is comprehensible from the statement that he made when he said that, 'Darl had a little spyglass he got in France at war.” In fact, the character of Darl was always a confusing one in Faulkner’s text; he had symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. At the time, post-World War I, there was surely little knowledge about the condition. This may explain why the Bundren family saw him as a “madman”; without incurring in ilicit suppositions on why they wanted to purge the family from him. All the symptoms are there to see, from schizophrenia to other questionable acts like trying to torch his mother’s casket toward the end of the novel; as a behavioural reenactment (Van Der Kolk & Van Der Hart, 1991, p. 160). These were signs that the family neglected. At the time, Darl may have been harboring plenty of emotions within his mind post-war and the burden of the Bundren’s secrets. Most of it must have been tragic considering his character in the literary text. This coupled with the death of Addie, may have affected him even more. In addition, this may explain his sudden breakdown as he mourned his mother. Faulkner attempts to expose the woes that Darl was facing, albeit by using his experiences and the experiences of other characters such as Addie.

Cathy Caruth (1995) speaks of the coming together of sociology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and literature when it comes to trauma. She points out that the coming together of these fields shows that there is a relationship, and post-traumatic stress disorder is one of the conditions that the aformentioned fields could address. This certainly speaks to the character of Darl. Indeed, Darl kept everything bottled up for so long. He barely spoke about his experiences and acted most of the time bizarrely. Cathy Caruth (1995) paints a picture of post-traumatic stress disorder to have certain aspects. Key among them is delayed responses to overwhelming events. The writing presents him as disturbed. However, as, Caruth points out, that was an obvious red flag on his demeanor, to point out that he was indeed suffering from this condition.

At times Darl said things that he did not even mean, or he said blatantly annoying things. Caruth (1995) also points out that most of the time, those who have post-traumatic stress disorder are bound to relieve it in the form of dreams, hallucinations, and at times even physically. This is a possibility as to what was happening to Darl. In Faulkner’s text for example, as Darl and Jewel approach the house from the journey to the home of Vernon Tull, Darl says something disturbing to Jewel. As they approach, he tells Jewel that he can be sure that his horse was still alive. This was a silly and patently upsetting joke considering that his mother had died (and Jewel’s mother is a horse). Darl also haphazardly altered his mood. He appeared not to care about his mother and even attempted to burn her casket at one time, and then in the next, he was mourning her death. This was unusual considering his behavior since Addie died.

Faulkner’s literature addresses the trauma caused by death and its effects on the family. However, it is clear that, indeed, the family suffered because of the death of Addie, but very few cared about her. Only Darl and Jewel appeared to care about their mother. Darl showed it by

the mourning after he tried to burn her corpse in the barn whereas Jewel does it by single-handedly putting the casket in the wagon, then refusing to travel on it because he was too emotional. He also saves the casket and the corpse inside it as Darl attempted to torch Addie as they embarked on the journey towards town. However, unlike Darl and Jewel, all the other family members had a definite agenda for going to town to bury Addie. In Unclaimed Experience, Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is a wound. However, unlike the physical wound inflicted on the body, trauma occurs on the mind. This makes sense because in the Bundren house, apart from Jewel and Darl, Vardaman and Dewey Dell appear to have a mental wound inflicted on them as well. Therefore, they both appear, as the novel unravels, as dissociated from the events unfolding around them.

Darl tells the story of the tragic experience that is taking place back home. This is disturbing considering that Darl was not home at the time. However, he tells the story with precision. The story is a traumatic experience, one that ends with Addie dead. Curiously, Faulkner uses Darl to tell the story of how his mother died, considering his location when the event took place. However, literature hides how Darl handled the death of his mother emotionally at first. Caruth (1996), in Unclaimed Experience, speaks of a traumatic experience as a voice that is an enigma of truth crying out from a wound. In this case, the voice belongs to Darl. He cries out to the world about the death of his mother. In as much as he does not show his emotions, then, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that the death of Addie caused Darl anguish.

The character of Darl is assuredly a peculiar one, on the one level, he narrates about himself, on another, about others. Dori Laub (1995) speaks on the levels of being a witness when articulating a traumatic experience. She speaks of being a witness to herself and others. Dori speaks of her deportation and her life as a child survivor (p. 61). A traumatic experience at that point. Moreover, as she articulates the narrative, she is dissimilar to Darl. Darl was on a journey with Jewel, knowing profoundly that his mother was dead, albeit with no confirmation whatsoever, besides from his sheer intuition. Uncertainty at this point is another aspect that may have clouded the trauma that Darl was feeling. This is because on the one hand he is virtually certain that his mother is dead, and on the other, he is still optimistic, within his mind that she may still be alive. The mere notion that Darl kept on referencing the certain death of their mother to a silent Jewel on the wagon is in itself a sign of trauma, which was starting to build up within him.

Faulkner portrays the character of Darl in many ways. As a caring son, as a bad son at times, as a mad person and sometimes as a rational person. Trauma in literature can change the outlook of a character. Trauma and literature intertwine in many ways, and the dissecting paths are clear in explaining the character of Darl. From a third-person point of view, trauma may have made Darl behave differently, and in many ways, this was indeed true. However, as to whether some of his actions were rational, this is debatable. His demeanor and decision-making may be unfavorable on many occasions. However, at one point, this may have changed. This goes to explain the nature of his post-traumatic stress disorder and his personality. The Bundren family was traveling to town to bury Addie. However, each of them had a selfish reason for doing so. However, Darl may have been rational than when he attempted to torch his mother’s corpse. The corpse was rotting, and the family had been struggling throughout the journey. What Darl attempted to do would be of help to the family.

Darl is a character that had faced plenty of trauma already. Before the death of Addie and after her death. He still had trauma from World War I, insofar as there is evidence to suggest that he

fought in France. From his behaviour, he also had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Above all, no one in the Bundren family appeared to love him, apart from Addie (not even surely). He was, therefore, an outcast. Faulkner portrays him as an antihero in the book. His trauma is one of the main themes in the book. Trauma in literature can portray in many ways, as from the outlook on Darl, it is clear that traumatic memory and literary texts intertwine.

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