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make or break

The Effects of Traumatic Experience on Sympathy in *As I Lay Dying*

Jordan Call

“Above all things let us never forget that mankind constitutes one great brotherhood; all born to encounter suffering and sorrow, and therefore bound to sympathize with each other.”

—Albert Pike

The deterioration of the relationships between the members of the Bundren family in *As I Lay Dying* demonstrates that even those with much in common can become profoundly detached from one another. Beyond whatever cohesion that being a family would imply, the Bundrens are in close physical proximity throughout the majority of the novel and generally experience the same events and challenges. Instead of capitalizing on these similarities and drawing closer to each other for support, they become progressively estranged from one another. Ultimately, the relationships within the Bundren family, if not necessarily characterized by outright enmity, are certainly devoid of sympathy. Their reaction is paradoxical: if “sympathy” is “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other,” then one would expect that these corresponding conditions would produce feelings of sympathy between them (“sympathy,” def 3b). But such is not the case with the Bundrens, who find

themselves all but estranged from each other at the close of the novel. Their dysfunctional relationships are a product of an interesting psychological paradox: shared experience may but does not always foster sympathy; traumatic experience, when combined with repression, poor communication, and conflicting psychological states, can render individuals less capable of feeling sympathy even for those who share their plight.

Repression

Psychological research indicates that trauma that is shared between people may result in their alienation from each other rather than increased sympathy and connection. A study published in the *Journal of Family Psychology* indicates that at times, such as in the wake of the death of a family member, “marital relationships are strained beyond repair . . . and that family stability is deleteriously affected by bereavement. . . . High rates of marital breakup are reported following childhood cancer fatalities . . . as well as the sudden death of a child by drowning” (Sorenson et al.).

Cases where relationships worsen do so in spite of the fact that each party supposedly experiences similar circumstantial grief. The article, however, also indicates that many relationships actually strengthen in the face of trauma and that at times “the death or serious illness of a family member may enhance communication and closeness among surviving members” (Sorenson et al.). The enhanced closeness supported by Sorenson stems in part from the phenomenon of sympathy, as people are drawn together by “similar or corresponding” feelings due to their mutual condition (“Sympathy,” def 3b). This study indicates that the loss of a child apparently causes marital relationships “to polarize, that is, improve or worsen considerably” (Sorenson et al.). What, then, are the factors that alternatively cause both increases and decreases in sympathy? A closer look at the Bundrens—who epitomize dysfunction and lack of sympathy, as will later be shown—suggests some answers.

The Bundrens, faced with polarizing pressures, gravitate towards dysfunction in the face of traumatic experience, in part because of the phenomenon of “repression,” one of Sigmund Freud’s psychological theories. Though Faulkner himself denies Freud’s influence, Freudian theory cannot be ignored in the reading of Faulkner’s work. John T. Irwin maintains that Faulkner’s denial only proves that “at some point the similarities in their work seemed great

enough (either to Faulkner himself or to readers who questioned him about those similarities) to make a denial of that influence seem worthwhile” (Irwin 5). He further lists more than a dozen Freudian ideas that crop up in Faulkner’s work (Irwin 6). Included on this list is the theory of repression, a Freudian coping mechanism, which is seen repeatedly throughout *As I Lay Dying*. This psychological phenomenon becomes a factor that helps destroy the Bundrens’ sympathy.

To understand the connection between repression and sympathy, one must understand the ostensible effects of repression. Alvin F. Poussaint, a former Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, published an article in *Ebony* magazine with the intent of instructing the magazine’s lay readership on how to healthily cope with tragedy. The first of his suggestions is to avoid “hold[ing] back all emotion,” or to avoid emotional repression (Poussaint 98). His article opens with a description of two families who experienced the unexpected death of a family member. Again, this has a polarizing effect: in one case, Poussaint reports increased mutual love and support; in another case, their grief sparked hostility, violence, and divorce. “Paradoxically,” he states, “a disaster that draws one family closer together may tear another family apart” (Poussaint 95). This is because a repressive coping strategy inhibits sympathy. Denying, ignoring, or avoiding one’s emotions will prevent one from acknowledging that others share those feelings; alternately, when people misrepresents their emotions, it can be hard for others to recognize that they each have feelings in common. Among the examples of repression in the text, Cash Bundren proves the most extreme. Shortly after the death of his mother, Addie, Cash is afforded the opportunity to take a chapter into his own hands; he may narrate the story, describe his feelings, or explain his thoughts freely. Indeed, previous chapters give the reader a basis to expect such helpful exposition. His contribution begins with one summarizing declaration of his thoughts and feelings: “I made it on the bevel.” This is followed by an equally unenlightening enumeration of reasons why he made his mother’s coffin “on the bevel” (Faulkner 82). This phrase, with its personal pronoun, its emphasis on the pedestrian aspects of his work, and its absence of descriptors of emotion, points to emotional repression. His list-like exposition demonstrates a mind being methodically trained away from grief and towards neutral, non-emotional facts.

A later chapter again demonstrates Cash’s repressive tendencies. Following both his near-drowning and the breaking of his leg, Cash provides us only with this fragmented thought: “It wasn’t on a balance. I told them that if they wanted

it to tote and ride on a balance, they would have to” (Faulkner 165). The tone is reminiscent of a parent vindicated by some minor and predicted misfortune that befalls a heedless child. Again we see the pattern of obvious and immediate pain being consciously ignored and repressed in favor of trifling details. This comes through apparent mental effort, as indicated by the repetitive, deliberate nature of his explanation. Anger and frustration find no expression in Cash’s chapter—much less the excruciating pain of breaking a leg. The intense trauma of these two events rules out the possibility that Cash is simply unaffected emotionally by them; rather, he is repressing his emotions.

Dysfunctional Communication

Another factor that contributes to the absence of sympathy is an inability to communicate functionally and openly. If sympathy consists of recognizing that others share one’s feelings, then the ability to communicate emotion becomes critical; if feelings and perspectives are not communicated, they cannot be recognized as sympathetic. The dearth of sympathy between the Bundrens stems in part from a failure to accomplish the exchange of emotion that is necessary when facing a traumatic experience. Early in the novel, Darl and Dewey Dell have a brief dialogue that demonstrates the scarcity of emotion in their communication:

“What do you want, Darl?” I say.

“She is going to die,” he says. And old turkey-buzzard Tull coming to watch her die but I can fool them.

“When is she going to die?” I say.

“Before we get back,” he says.

“Then why are you taking Jewel?” I say.

“I want him to help me load,” he says. (Faulkner 27–28)

Note the repetition of the verb “to say,” which implies no emotion whatsoever, and the absence of descriptors—whether applied to the characters and their state, how they “say” the lines, or their reactions to what is said. Furthermore, Darl’s response to Dewey Dell’s question evades being an actual answer. Where Dewey Dell wants to know why Darl would rob his brother of his last moments with his mother, Darl answers as if she only wanted to know what he needed him for. These instances of miscommunication illuminate the

isolation that the Bundrens experience in the latter end of the novel; their failure to communicate emotions makes sympathetic connection difficult.

Indeed, the Bundrens are scarcely capable of meaningful communication whatsoever. Later in the novel, Dewey Dell records the following dialogue, which reveals the Bundrens' mental remoteness:

"Why didn't we go to New Hope, pa? Vardaman says. "Mr. Samson said we was, but we done passed the road."

Darl says, "Look, Jewel." But he is not looking at me. He is looking at the sky. The buzzard is as still as if he were nailed to it. . . .

"Look, Jewel," Darl says. Jewel sits on his horse like they were both made out of wood, looking straight ahead.

I believe in God, God. God, I believe in God. (Faulkner 122)

None of these statements are even acknowledged by the intended listener. If these words and thoughts were read in turn by actors, it would sound more like a radio flipping through stations than a coherent conversation. Vardaman's question goes unanswered and unacknowledged. Darl asks Jewel to look, and Jewel does not look. Dewey Dell herself betrays total mental disengagement from the conversation: her invoking the name of God comes as a random and desperate interjection against a calm backdrop. These characters' inability to communicate even functional ideas isolates them from one another. Effective communication especially binds together traumatized individuals, for if their communication reveals common ground, they become better able to find the sympathetic support that trauma leaves them seeking. The passage above displays the Bundrens' unfortunate struggle to communicate anything at all. While John Earl Basset identifies "the isolation of the individual [and] human communication" as two of the major themes of the novel (125), one could argue that it is in fact the Bundrens' poor communication that causes such isolation.

Conflicting Psychological States

But the root of the Bundrens' sympathy deficiency goes deeper than either the theory of repression or even struggles of communication—even if the Bundrens had been able to communicate, sympathy requires communication of corresponding emotions, and the Bundrens have little by way of common

emotional ground. Faulkner employs the technique of multiple narration to accentuate the differences between each character's emotional state. Early in the novel, just before Addie's death, Faulkner allows the reader a rare glimpse into the mind of Jewel. His bitterness and anger have a flame-like intensity, so hot that his mental and emotional foundations begin to melt. He becomes irrational, deciding that his mother will die "because [Cash] stays out there, right under the window, hammering and sawing on that [expletive] box" (Faulkner 14). Here, Jewel demonstrates a reversal of cause and effect—he is convinced that somehow Addie is dying only for the sake of filling the coffin Cash is making. This backwards logic results from and attests to the strength of Jewel's emotions, which overpowers his capacity for rational thought. His language, which features hammers, saws, and curse words, is violent and vindictive. This violence surfaces again in his fantasy about "rolling the rocks down the hill at [his family's] faces," which displays the cataclysmic impact of his mother's state on his psyche; to destroy his family's faces is to violently destroy all that is recognizable and familiar in a world that has become so painful for him (Faulkner 15). Addie's impending demise affects Jewel's emotions with all the subtlety of a hurricane.

Dewey Dell, on the other hand, demonstrates an antithetical reaction to Addie's death. In Jewel's brief turn as narrator, he mentions that Dewey Dell is stationed beside her dying mother to fan her. Though her mother's death rapidly approaches and despite her physical proximity to her mother, Dewey's thoughts could not be further from her mother or her illness. Her first internal monologue mentions the fact that her mother was nearing death only in passing, and her narration instead focuses on a memory of a sexual encounter with a man named Lefe (Faulkner 26). The critical aspect of the chapter lies in what is notably absent: any hint that she is emotionally affected by her mother's imminent death. This appears to be not so much repression as apathy. While Dewey Dell and Jewel share a circumstance—the death of their mother—their feelings and perspectives are in stark contrast. The psychological states of Jewel and Dewey Dell are too different to allow them to sympathize with each other. Sympathy would require them to be experiencing and communicating "similar or corresponding" feelings, feelings that do not exist between the two of them. Because their perspectives are so disparate, perhaps irreconcilably so, the momentous experiences they have together do not lead to compatible feelings between them.

Absence of Sympathy

While the Bundrens are by no means a model functional family at the beginning of the novel, the tension caused by each successive traumatic event—Addie’s illness, her death, the disastrous river crossing, the barn fire caused by Darl—even further exacerbates these differences. More trauma creates more negative feelings, which leads in turn to higher levels of repression in those individuals with repressive tendencies. Greater difficulties require greater cooperation and communication to resolve, and since the Bundrens communicate so poorly, each problem only increases the difference between the needed and the actual communication. Similarly, as the Bundrens tend to display incongruous perspectives, each unfortunate twist in their fate adds another layer to the barrier of perspective that secludes them. Thus, instead of providing the family with material with which to forge a sympathetic understanding and unity, their traumatic experiences only pull them further apart.

This effect culminates in the disturbing lack of sympathy that the Bundrens display in the closing scenes of the novel. The Bundrens undergo a complete deterioration of family ties. When Darl is overtaken by the men who will institutionalize him, he is actually subdued by his family rather than protected. Though Cash attempts to rationalize that this is necessary in order to prevent their being sued, his later statement that the loss of his brother to a distant institution is “a shame, in a way,” speaks volumes of his and his family’s lack of sympathy (Faulkner 234). His diction suggests a tragedy of the same magnitude of a picnic getting rained on; applying the same diction to the insanity and irretrievable loss of a sibling is chilling in its inhumanity.

Anse is another prime example of the absence of sympathy. In his dealings with Cash and Dewey Dell late in the novel, Anse earns his reputation as “one of Faulkner’s most accomplished villains” (Brooks 154). He is perhaps the least capable of sympathy of the Bundrens. His decision to treat Cash’s leg with concrete saves a few dollars for Anse, and costs Cash “sixty-odd square inches of skin” (Faulkner 240). He disregards the passionate pleas of Dewey Dell that he should not take the money given to her by Lefe to pay for an abortion. Her desperate refrain of “Pa. Pa,” is ignored each of the four times it is uttered, and Anse takes the money. With it, he purchases himself false teeth, a symbol of his self-absorption (Faulkner 256–257). Brooks’ opinion that Anse’s “callousness and cruelty” is “essential,” or part of his very character, is problematic (155). Anse’s examples of cruelty come in the middle and later stages of the novel,

indicating that Anse is a dynamic character who becomes less sympathetic—as much toward others as in the eyes of the reader—as he experiences the various traumatic events in the novel. This viewpoint is supported by Rita Rippetoe, who maintains that Anse “has been distorted by the effects of [his] specific afflictions” (314). Indeed, each member of the Bundren family becomes distorted by their afflictions, leading ultimately to apathy, cruelty, and even insanity—but never sympathy.

Conclusion

As I Lay Dying demonstrates the fact that shared conditions do not always have the effect of attracting or pulling people towards each other. Thus, even though experiencing a tragedy with another person generally increases the sympathy between the parties, traumatic events may also do the opposite. In an absence of interpersonal affinity exists between two or more people, such occurrences and conditions will more than likely drive them apart from each other rather than unify them. The Bundrens’ repression, poor communication, and inharmonious psychological states ultimately lead them to states of great isolation and apathy towards each other. The colloquial expression “make or break” aptly describes the effect that great adversity has on groups of people: either the relationships will be made more unified due to greater measures of sympathy and understanding, or they will be broken apart—like the Bundrens—as their differences become too great to reconcile.

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