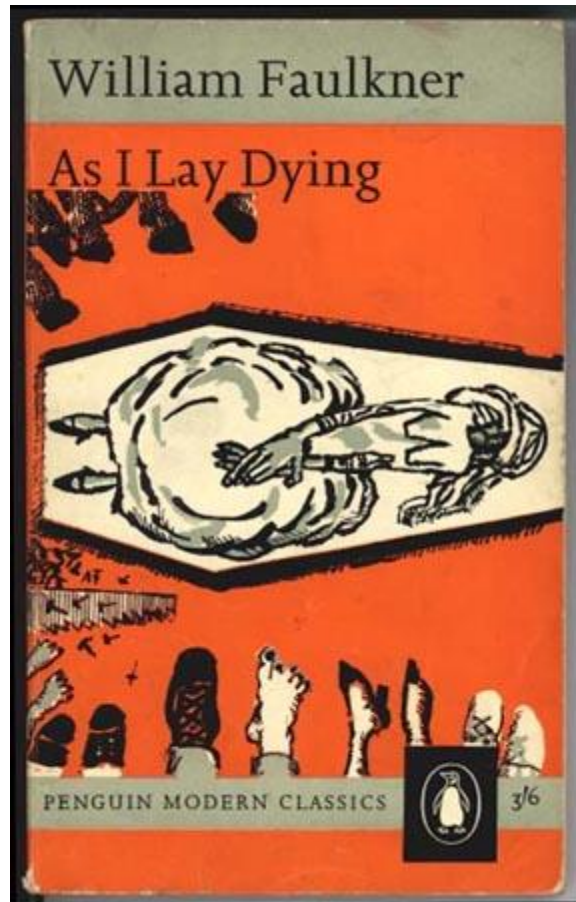


Cubistic Pixel's in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

A. Rajkumar, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. G. Arputhavel Raja

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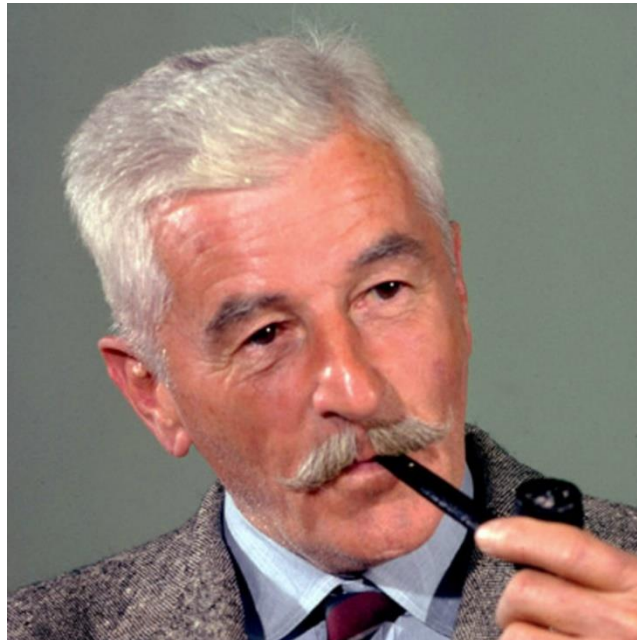
Courtesy: <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/108166/dying.html>

**Abstract**

William Faulkner is a typical writer and one of the transcendent writers of twentieth century who is best known for his fictional town Yoknapatawpha and cubistic technique of writing. He was much influenced by the paintings of Picasso and Braque, which makes him to write his novels using geometrical shapes to visualize the reality of his plot to readers. The article emphasizes how the geometrical shapes like cube, circle, horizontal, vertical, line, triangle

etc., functions in his novel *As I Lay Dying*. The article affirms how the geometric special abstractions apprise the setting and plot of the novel, and later to show how the spatiality of setting and plot in turn shape the characters, and finally to mix the theme in the spatiality of the characters. The cubistic shapes in this novel reveal the reality and circle of human life in abstract form. My research argues how Faulkner brilliantly uses the cubist painting technique of Picasso and Braque to write the novel geometrically.

**Keywords:** William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, Cubism, Geometrical Shapes, Reality, Abstraction, Circle.



William Faulkner 1897-1962

Courtesy: <https://www.biography.com/people/william-faulkner-9292252>

### **William Faulkner**

William Faulkner is considered a major twentieth century American author whose historical novels portray the decline and decay of the upper concretion of southern society. He is a modern novelist and short story writer who won the Noble Prize for literature in 1949. The imaginative power and psychological depth of his work grade him as one of America's greatest novelists. His literary career commenced with poetry, but he gradually began to write novels that went on to revolutionize the face of literature. His works have tolerable impact on twain, popular and modernist literature, personified typically the ethics of southern America and sensibility. Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, and soon migrated to Oxford. The action of his novels almost takes place in and around Oxford. Most of his novels inquire deeply into the protocol and morals of the south. He has written many novels and short stories, but among them *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury* is considered as his masterpiece.

### **Interest in Modernist Paintings – Single Subject in Multiple Perspectives**

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**Dr. T. Deivasigamani, Editor: Vol. II Black Writings: A Subaltern Perspective**

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Faulkner was interested in modernist paintings of Picasso and Braque, which molded him to write the text using cubistic technique. The painting of Picasso and Braque is classified as analytic cubism, which represents a single subject in multiple perspectives. This unit emphasizes the mathematical images used by Faulkner to shape human characters in *As I Lay Dying*. Lindsay Gellman in *The Paris Review* argued that Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* is consciously written in analytic cubism structure as:

Faulkner deliberately modeled the structure of his early work, like *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* along analytic-cubist lines. Just as Picasso and Braque fragment their canvas in an attempt to capture the subject from many perspectives at once, Faulkner shifts his narrative voice from one character to another, surrounding the plot from all sides while interrupting its flow (4).

### **Cubists and Internal Landscape**

Faulkner in his excerpt texts presents letters, plantation ledgers, and diaries, written by characters within the realm of his fiction. The psychologist Sigmund Freud considers cubists were more concerned with the internal landscape of the individual than the external landscape of the objective world. Moreover, in modernist literature the psyche, the subconscious, the conscious intellect, and creative abstraction became more important than the objective one-dimensional portraiture of object which proceeded in Victorian period.

### **Picasso and *As I Lay Dying***

Everyone knows that Picasso's paintings contain various planes and angles of perception by comparing other paintings. Many modernist writers used this technique to show how narrative realities change through the subjective perspective of different characters. Faulkner was one among them, and mastered this multiple perspective technique in his novel *As I Lay Dying*. In this novel, he portrayed the death and burial of rustic matron Addie Burden, through the interlinking perspectives of more than twelve characters. Each character has their own voice, tone, and vocabulary which relay the events of the narrative in a distinct way. Alike Picasso, Faulkner created an abrupt collage of image which reveals the abstract and relativity at the heart of human experience. This novel is narrated by fifteen different characters in fifty nine chapters. Cubism is one of the predominant techniques found in this novel. Each character has their own view and opinion of another character and themselves, which is how these individuals are flashed out over the course of the story. Through this, we are given multiple points of view on a subject allowing us to see them through varying lenses and in different ways. The main goal of cubism is to show different angles and views of a single object in multiple perspectives.

### **Emphasis on Universal Truth through the Use of Cubistic Shapes**

In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner deliberately uses the geometrical cubistic shapes to emphasize the universal truth and reality of life. He used the circle image in this novel to refer the cycle of life and death. Darl at the time of his mother Addie says that her eyes looks like the circular crater of a candle holder as, "her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks" (7). The circle image is seen by many characters at the time of Addie's death and they comprehend it in themselves. The disintegration of death that is figured in circle imagery and it also appears in the plot's circular shape. The continuation of

cyclical death in life is further suggested by the cyclical imagery of the children's aspiration. Dewey Dell, daughter of Addie wants an abortion that will restore her menstrual cycle. Vardaman wants a toy train that goes in circles around the tracks. And Cash wants a gramophone that goes in circle around the tracks.

### **Interplay of Vertical and Horizontal**

The interplay of vertical and horizontal in *As I Lay Dying* is the most important spatial arrangement. The transformation of tree image from vertical to horizontal is seen as common image. Addie's casket and the wagon that carries it are both images of tree turned into horizontal planks. The tree in nature stand straight in vertical position and after a cut it transformed into horizontal motion. Similarly the verticality of the mountain atop which the Bundren's live is likened to a tree. Water imagery also suggests the inter changeability of vertical and horizontal. At the time of raining, motion of the drops is in vertical, and after the fall it transformed into horizontal motion like sea, river, lake, etc.

Anse visualize the rain between himself and his sons who are gone with the wagon as, "a shutting down behind them like wall" (31). Faulkner also depicts water as horizontal because the clouds moves horizontally to all the places we move. In this novel Anse feels that the rain is walking along with the road side "like a durn man" (33). After the rainfall, water moves horizontally and forms as river which becomes barrier to the Bundren's journey. The water also evaporates and changes by resuming its vertical motion to horizontal clouds. Therefore the vertical and horizontal motions are combined in hydrological cycle.

### **A Vertical Character**

In this novel, Anse is seen most uniformly as vertical character. He places his home atop of the mountain and tries to be immobile. Peabody tells that Anse hasn't been in town for twelve years. Anse's verticality is most evident in his contention that horizontal things like the road have brought trouble to his door. He says that Addie was, "well and hale as ere a women ever were, except for that road" (33). He declares that only horizontal things such as snake, fish, horse, and wagons were meant for moving while vertical things such as trees, corn, and people should stay. Addie is totally opposite to Anse, because she is framed as horizontal character in this novel. She has struggled against the kind of containment Anse wants for himself. She becomes distant from everyone but Jewel. Appropriately, in opposing verticality she associates words with airy abstractions and the heavenly aspirations of Cora and Whitfield, the latter of whom she literally brings down to earth when they have sexual relations by the spring. For Addie, Whitfield's rhapsodizing about the transcendent is merely "high dead words" (161). She says, "Words go straight up in a thin line ... and ... doing goes along the earth ... so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other" (160). Her horizontality is so strong that Peabody feels that she pushes him away with the power of her eyes. "It's like she was shoving at me with them ... like the stream from a hose touches you ..." (39-41).

## Special Arrangements

Special arrangements are accurate when Darl accounts in his description. For example, he chronicled the coffin on sawhorse as, “a cubistic bug” (201) and interpret the bright image of woodchips on the cryptic world as an example of Dark Impressionism, “smears of soft pale paint on a black canvas” (67). Faulkner used pictorial descriptions to represent people in his novel. He characterize Cash’s hair as, “plastered in a smooth smear across his forehead as though done with a paint brush” (142), and he portray Addie’s face as, “framed by a window” and forming “a composite picture”(43-44). He compares Vardaman’s blanching face to “a piece of piece of paper pasted on a failing wall” (45), and he analyzes Addie’s face to “a casting of fading bronze upon the pillow” (47). The characters suggest a three dimensional motion, and yet the pillow advocate a wrapped background to which the casting is secured. Therefore, Darl flattens the staring into two dimensional objects like the figure cut from canister that he uses to depict Jewel. Darl cubistically reduces three dimensional gadgets almost into two dimensional objects, but Anse is the only character who seems to him as three dimensional. Darl realize and represents paradoxically like a cubist painter in this novel.

Faulkner follows the tradition of Picasso and Braque’s painting technique using geometric shapes, he shows the multi-dimension of reality. Throughout the novel Faulkner use geometric pixels to shape characters, and design the plot in reality. The entire novel was structured through the geometric principles. Panthea Reid Broughton in his essay “Faulkner’s Cubist Novels”, suggest the formation of this novel as, “Repeating geometric designs-lines and circles, verticals and horizontal – Faulkner actually facts, like a cubist painting the design of this book” (93). It is thematically significant that the novel opens with a painterly perception that multiplies visual angles and perspectives. Darl sees from one viewpoint, the path and cotton house straight ahead of him; he conserves or imagines another viewpoint, of Jewel walking behind, and he constructs a third viewpoint, of himself and Jewel being observed by another person. The human characters in this novel are measured as vertical and horizontal measurement by their psychological state.

## Darl

Darl is the real writer of this novel, because Faulkner himself reflected his own interest in art through the character Darl. In the sense, Faulkner through Darl wrote this text in rectangular box of pages in which each page is canvas of vertical stacked in horizontal lines. Each line in this novel considered to be a strand of two dimensional sort for developing the two dimensional characters in the continuous design made circular in time made spatial. Faulkner believes that there is no universal stability and no metaphysical reference is used in his work. The novel has multiple view point like the cubistic painting had in it. This multiple view point asserts Darl’s dimensional problematic vision in this novel. Darryl Hattenhauer in his article, “The Geometric Design of *As I Lay Dying*” explores Faulkner as a cubist writer through the character Darl such as:

Faulkner not only thematizes spatially, but also relativizes point of view (including the viewer’s/readers perspective) by representing multiple point of view not just by having several conflicting narrators, but by having Darl see what is normally obscured – by having Darl see all sides of the cube. Writing about

writing, focusing on design, thematizing form, Faulkner has created a text that minimizes the gaps between the setting, the plot, Darl, and Faulkner, for the geometric technique aligns them even as it reveals that (like Cash's level) they are beyond the confines of Yoknapatawpha, displayed. (52)

### To Conclude

Therefore, Faulkner realizes that other than geometrical shapes, nothing can visualize the reality of a subject in a text to the readers. For example, the cycle of life can be only explained by circle image, and nothing can compensate the geometrical shape which is accepted universally. Like that in science the food chain is referred through triangle or inverted pyramid and circle to show the value of food. This novel is structured by the principles of cubistic paintings which allow the readers to think broader. Cubism doesn't have any specific constructed boundaries, and it easily helps to deconstruct a text in abstract form as the paintings of Picasso and Braque. So from this we conclude that Faulkner through the geometrical shapes he painted *As I Lay Dying* in abstract form to show the reality of life.

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