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The Ideology of Madness: the Rejected Artist vs. the Capitalist Society in *As I Lay Dying*

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In William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* Darl Bundren interrupts his family's journey to bury the remains of their deceased mother, Addie Bundren, when he sets fire to a barn containing his mother's coffin. This act has spawned numerous works of Faulknerian criticism all seeking to explain the eccentricities of the character of Darl and whether or not his characteristics and actions can simply be deduced as "pure crazy" as the society within the novel determines (Faulkner 233). This essay will explore how Darl is perceived in that society, and how that ultimately leads to his condemnation as mentally ill. Furthermore, with that definition of madness acknowledged, I will then explore the ideological function of madness in light of the condemning society's capitalist bias or project—its motivation based on capital production and gain—which would shun any character operating outside of that ideology. It is my purpose, then, to posit that Darl Bundren is not mad, but, in fact, an artist as he uses poetic transcription, intuition, and empathy to attempt to construct his own reality. However, the society which encompasses this artist is one driven by the ideology of capitalism, one that feels threatened by the artist's position as a creative, re-defining force opposing the values of capitalism, at least as concerns physical work and the respect of property. Therefore, as this society is nearly opposite in values to Darl, it then uses the constructed ideology of madness to dismiss, condemn, and remove him from society. Ultimately, then, herein lays the ultimate tragedy of the novel: Darl Bundren is not mad, but he is simply an artist who cannot exist in a society where his own ideals clash with long-seated capitalist ideologies; and, as such, the artist, Darl, must be removed from that society by any means necessary to ensure that those ideologies are persevered, and that society ever moves forward in its capitalistic endeavors.

First and foremost, in *As I Lay Dying* Darl is not just simply defined as mad; but, rather, he is attributed with the more general label of "queer," in the traditional sense of strangeness or otherness, which initiates his demarcation from society that ultimately leads to his condemnation as mad (Faulkner 24). Consider that Darl is distinguished as "different from...others" within his society showing that those around him recognize him as "different from" themselves (Faulkner 21). However, this recognition is not a positive demarcation; rather, it leads to a sort of before-the-storm dismissal of Darl as "queer" and "lazy" where "queer" has the connotations of strangeness attached to it only reinforced by the label of "lazy" (Faulkner 24).

But to understand the gravity of the term "queer" as applied to Darl, I turn to David Halperin's claims that "queer is by definition whatever is at odds with... [society]" meaning that Darl is labeled as "queer" because he is "different" from society; and, because he is different, he is then "at odds with," or pitted against, society (Halperin n.p., Faulkner 24). And it is this queering of Darl, this definition of the man as being "at odds" with society, that leads to him being dismissed as

mad essentially because he is different, and consequentially at odds, with the society he inhabits. This connection between the queering of Darl and the definition of his madness is best seen in Cash Bundren's deliberation on whether or not Darl is "pure crazy" when he considers directly that his brother is "queer" and that "he cant see eye to eye with other folks" (Faulkner 233, 237, 234). Again, Cash directly uses that same label of queer to characterize Darl in the context of determining his madness. Furthermore, he gives a sort of practicality to the implications of Darl's queerness where "he cant see eye to eye with other folks," meaning he cannot work with or agree with his fellow man, which for Cash, and the rest of society, is the decisive factor wherein they can definitively "reckon a man is crazy" (Faulkner 234). Therefore, this queerness, this difference within Darl which places him at odds with society because he cannot see eye to eye with it, leads to his condemnation as mentally disturbed. Although, in greater context, this connection between queerness and madness shows that the society that Darl inhabits does not simply view madness as based on any empirical psychological observation—at least in the diagnosable, scientific sense—instead it views madness as a logical extension of queerness in that Darl is queer, so then he is different from and pitted against society, and as such he must be insane.

But with all of that taken into account, the radical difference between queering Darl and condemning him as insane may seem jarring—how could a society simply label Darl as insane just because he seems to be at odds with it? Simply put, the label of madness imposed by that society is an "arbitrary and communally created" ideology based on the capitalist biases and work-driven preferences of that society so Darl, as a character starkly not in compliance with this ideology in comparison to other characters, is condemned and labeled as queer and, ultimately, mad (Southard 47). To begin analyzing this capitalist ideology at play in the society surrounding Darl, allow me to cite Michel Foucault's essay "Madness and Society" where the philosopher pinpoints "labor; or economic production" as a primary "human activity" which, in result, serves as a decisive "criterion for determining madness" (Foucault 336-337). And certainly Darl's society is one driven by productivity and labor seen from an array of examples such as the fact that even though Addie Bundren, the mother of Darl, Cash, etc., lies on her "death bed", still Darl and Jewel must go out and try "to make [a mere] extra three dollars" so then the necessity or "must"-ness of work even interjects the sanctity of familial mourning to the fact that Anse Bundren, father of Darl, Cash, etc., is only focused on "[eating] God's victuals as a man should" which he would obtain for his work while mentally listing off all the things he's got to pay" for despite the fact that his wife is dying (Faulkner 22, 37). In summation, then, this microcosm of society is more focused on their labor and what it can wield despite the fact that perhaps the dearest person to them, their mother, is dying.

Hence, it is this same capitalist mindset, a mindset which supersedes reverence even for death, that assesses the character of Darl. Perhaps it is best to show how that society assesses Darl by juxtaposing the latter alongside someone who is representative of the capitalist ideology which places work-driven individuals as more valuable than those who transcend the necessity of labor and production and are, consequentially, labeled as queer and, by extension, mad. For example, Darl presents an interior narrative monologue which starkly contrasts, and utterly rejects, those ideologies which surround him (the greater meaning of which will be later divulged in this paper). Consider the very introduction of the novel where Darl and his brother Jewel have “come up from the field” where the “field” is a place of work on which the Bundren family toils and pursues their capitalist project of working to sell, profit, and consume goods, and where the brothers have “come up” from that place of work implying that they have just quit, or are in the process of, working. Alternatively, though, Darl’s mind is not on the work he is or has been doing. Rather, he muses on his surroundings as seen in his observation that “Jewel’s frayed and broken straw hat [is] a full head above my own” wherein Darl even goes so far as to elaborate on the condition of the “hat” as “frayed” and “broken” showing that his eye of focus is on the minute details of life rather than solely his work in “the field.” In fact, he continues on in such poetic observation and translation of the world around him accounting for the “path...worn smooth by feet and baked brick-hard” and the “empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight” of the “broken roof,” all details otherwise ignored or unelaborated upon by the character’s that simply see a “path” on which to walk from “the field” of work or a “broken roof” which needs mending so that its use-value can be maximized and so on and so on (Faulkner 3-4). Such a poetic eye and narrative tract is in stark contrast with the worker mentality of an undistinguished character such as Cash Bundren whose first interior monologue isn’t even a traditional narrative as much as it is a worker’s specification checklist as he numbers his thought process concerning his work lists such as “1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.” Such a utilitarian mindset that is so intensely focused on work, on how it can use “nails” to best “grip” whatever it is that it is working on, forgoes any sort of individualistic declaration aside from the individual in relation to work as seen in “I made it on a bevel” where the “I” only exists next to what it has “made” through work all for the end goal of fulfilling the sacred goal of labor (Faulkner 82). Thus, Darl’s mental makeup is demarcated from the rest of society around him—where he waxes and wanes over the landscape surrounding him, the rest of his society is focused on the details of their work so much so that it loses individuality within it.

In consequence, society determines this departure from a rigid work, and thereby capitalist, centric mentality as “lazy,” as being the exact opposite of work, and therefore having no value (Faulkner 24). And, in the end, it is Darl who is

defined as queer and dismissed as mad where Cash is in fact left to exist as a productive worker in society. So, with all this capitalist framework in mind, consider that this “criterion for determining madness” is in fact “arbitrarily and communally created” because it is formulated “less [by] legitimizing diagnosis and more...[by] public opinion” (Foucault 336-337, Southard 47). This “public opinion” that perceives Darl as lazy is not any sort of sound evidence for determining if an individual is “pure crazy” because it does not take into account any empirical or neurological “diagnosis” pointing to any actual mental illness (Southard 59, Faulkner 233) Rather, such an arbitrarily defined criteria for madness exposes the underlying capitalist ideology of that communally formulated opinion that venerates labor and economic production as being so valuable to that if an individual were to pose as different or queer within that society simply because their sole focus is not laboring to obtain “extra...dollars,” they must indeed be insane (Faulkner 22). Therefore, this condemnation of Darl as mad is “communally created,” it is based on “labor; or economic production” being society’s primary concern, and it is “arbitrarily” formed because there is no sound reasoning, but simply a capitalist imposition, on how an individual should conduct themselves to be accepted by that society as normal (Southard 47, Foucault 336).

Ultimately, then, as the accusations of Darl’s madness exists on a bedrock of false ideology arbitrarily pieced together by his community, as Darl Bundren is not truly mad, what then explains his act of burning down “a man’s barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property” (Faulkner 233)? Furthermore, what explains his character that is perceived as so different from the rest of the world around him? I posit that Darl Bundren is the novel’s artist, an artist akin to a “vates” of yore who acts as a “poet...diviner, [and] forseer” in that he possesses “an eloquent interior monologue” filled with poetic transcription of the landscape around him; an “enigmatic clairvoyance,” or nearly supernatural intuition of events; and, a natural inclination toward empathy allowing him to attempt to create a new reality so that his family may exist in a state of “blessing,” a creation which ultimately leads to Darl burning of the barn (Sidney 2, Southard 47, Faulkner 233). First and foremost, Darl shows signs of artistry in that uses poetic language to depict the world as he sees it. For example, when faced with an overflowing river that prevents the Bundren family from continuing onward, Darl focuses his poetic eye on “the thick dark current” that he claims “talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls for an instant, silent, impermanent, and profoundly significant.” Thus, from this simple river where the “dark current runs” Darl manages to create some sort of sentient thing that “talks” in a particular way, a “murmur;” that has physical characters as it is not just “dimpled,” but “dimpled monstrously into fading swirls;” and, that has a greater, “silent” meaning that is “profoundly

significant.” Therefore, this description of a river shows the artist at work. Darl not only creates the image of a living river through his poetic description, but he is so highly inventive that he even gives such seemingly random and specific details as to how “dimpled” the current is. However, notice that this description presents a further nuance to Darl’s status as an artist in that not only is he merely describing the river in a poetic way, but he is re-defining the reality he is presented with. He is creating a new world with his language. Instead of simply focusing on the fact that this river is deadly in that it is “nigh up to the levee on both sides” so it is dangerously deep, so deep that the family might have to “swim” to get across it, and that it is filled with “logs scraping and bumping” throughout the water that could collide with the Bundren’s as they cross the waters, he transcends this reality and formulates his river that is “huge and alive,” a river not just simply a threat to his family, but a dynamic being that talks and actively “clucks and murmurs” (Faulkner 124, 145, 141). In short, Darl uses his “eloquent interior monologue” to create “forms such as never were in nature,” in this case a living river (Southard 47, Sydney 2). Additionally, Darl foresees events before they occur such as when Darl and Jewel have “went to make a load” just as the “two flames” of Addie Bundren’s eyes “go out” showing that she has died (Faulkner 48). Before they arrive back home, Darl intuits that “Addie Bundren is dead” showing that indeed he is a foreseer of events as attributed to “the poet,” or, more generally, the artist (Faulkner 52, Sydney 2).

Perhaps most importantly, Darl exemplifies an elevated sense of empathy which is characteristic of the artist who must understand and empathize with the state of the world around them so that they may then truly depict and/or bring their world into a better state through their art. This empathy is best seen in the very act which results in his condemnation, the burning of the barn. The initial motivation for this action, the answer as to why Darl was willing to burn a man’s barn and [endanger] his stock and [destroy] his property,” is that Darl is empathizing with the family Bundren’s greater distress. At this point in the narrative, the Bundren family is without “no team” to haul them the remainder of the journey; nearly without any food as Anse continually dismisses aid for his whole family by saying that they “crave nothing;” Cash hobbling around with a “broken leg” that the family cannot afford to properly fix; Dewey Dell pregnant as only Darl “knew;” and the bitter Jewel who Anse nearly sends “[running] away from home” as he trades his prize horse for money (Faulkner 195, 27, 190). And yet still Anse is determined to drive the family onward until they successfully bury Addie. Therefore, Darl sees his family in this distraught state and decides to act so that “the word” with which he would depict and create realities can be “made flesh,” he can move his artistry into the external, physical world so that then he can fulfill his empathy with his family and bring them into a better state (Delville 69). Darl sees that only by burning the barn that contains Addie’s coffin

and body can he “take her outen” the family’s distraught “hands and get her shut in some clean way,” he can relieve them of the burden of completing the journey and burying Addie (Faulkner 233). And the choice of fire is a fit way for the artist Darl to remove his mother’s corpse from the world in an efficient, Promethean way in that it employs the “modern artist...theory of creative destruction” to perform his greatest act of fulfilled empathy (Atkinson 21-22). By using “destruction” to set the barn ablaze with a “soundless explosion” and “flames” which surely would quickly consume his mother’s body, Darl would be removing the remnants of Addie Bundren from the world in that sought after “clean” way whilst bringing to life, through his “creative” prowess, a world in which his family is no longer suffering because of the “harrowing burial journey” (Faulkner 219, 233, Atkinson 21). In summary, Darl’s burning of the barn is simply an act of art with empathy at its core. However, society does not see the greater picture that Darl sees wherein the wellness and stability of his family calls for eccentric action. They do not see that Darl is a “diviner” who would be bestow upon his family “God’s blessing” by burning the barn, and by extension the coffin and Addie’s corpse, as a form of artistic work (Sydney 2, Faulkner 233). Consequentially, this creative expression is lost in translation in the physical world of “flesh” and, as such, is interpreted as an act of “blatant arson” conducted by a man who is pure crazy (Delville 69, Atkinson 22).

Thus, Darl is an artist whose character is concerned with his own poetic prowess and work so that he comes into conflict with his society’s capitalist ideology. However, this ideologically driven society only gives value to how useful something or someone is in terms of utility or use-value with an ends toward the accumulation of capital, so this creates tension which results in society’s application of the ideological label of madness to negate and remove Darl from that society. As briefly mentioned, this society assesses Darl’s actions as an artist initially as lazy and mere “pottering about” as opposed to, say, Cash who is a useful, “good carpenter” with “always more building,” or productivity, “than he can get to, or Jewel who is “always doing something that made him some money,” or directly accumulating capital which holds perhaps the highest use-value in that society as it can be used to obtain the ever-so sought after “victuals,” or coveted goods (Faulkner 24, 37). But what this assessment really amounts to is an assessment of Darl’s work. It is a utilitarian perspective wherein a person can only be held as “good” if they are useful, as Cash is as a carpenter and as Jewel is for making money (Faulkner 24). Therefore, though Darl performs internal work, that of the artist interpreting and re-defining new realities, society only sees his external use-value in respect to how it can obtain capital. For example, though Darl looks out over the surrounding landscape perceiving everything from the “breeze” vibrantly alive as it “draws through the hall all the time” and even the littlest detail such as “a feather” as it “will rise and brush along” through the

world, society simply sees that he is “full of the land all the time” where “all” of his “time” is spent merely “pondering about” on the “land” instead of working to be “a good carpenter” or making “money” like his brothers (Faulkner 19-20, 36). Society does not value his artistic perception, transcription, or creativity, but simply sees that he is “pondering about” all the time instead of working, and whatever work he could be doing has no blatant connection to the obtaining of capital unlike directly making money or perfecting a skill wherein he could obtain capital (Faulkner 24).

Ultimately, society’s general dismissal of Darl’s work as an artist culminates in the more dire condemnation of his work as a “threat of social upheaval on the...community due to his destruction” as it exits the confines of his “eloquent interior monologue” and becomes concrete “flesh” in the external world as physical action, that of “setting fire to a man’s barn” (Southard 48, 47, Delville 69, Faulkner 233). Here, though Darl is performing the work of an artist by employing creative theories wherein he seeks to create a new reality for his family through the burning of Addie’s body and coffin, and the barn that contains them, society only sees the fact that such an act is “endangering [a man’s] stock,” which are capital in that they can be bought, sold, and used for further production, and that the only destruction is to “a [man’s] private property” (Faulkner 233). The latter point is perhaps the most profane for that capitalist society would hold private property to be essential for capitalism to exist as it promotes the individual desire for goods as those goods can be privately owned. Therefore, society not only sees that Darl’s physical creative work of initiating a fire as useless, it sees his work as antagonistic to the very foundation of a capitalist society, it sees Darl’s action as purely antagonistic “destruction” (Atkinson 22).

And it is this condemnation of Darl’s work that creates a tension in valuation of work which leads to the necessity of dismissing him as mad. Consider the Bundren family’s initial reaction when Cash states that they must “send [Darl] to Jackson” to receive treatment for being “pure crazy,” or “have Gillespie” the man whose barn Darl set fire to, “sue us.” So, the family must either embrace Darl’s work as legitimate and except the consequences of having a man sue them, or they must send Darl away to by placing the label of madness upon him which would validate him being taken away to “Jackson” to “fix” him and subsequently free the family of the burden of potentially having “Gillespie sue” them. Obviously, under the capitalist ideology of that society which focuses on the use-value and accumulation of capital goods above all, the Bundrens then must condemn Darl first and foremost because his work is either lazy or leads to destruction in their eyes, but also because acting otherwise would result in the loss of capital goods as they would lose money in the lawsuit. The family even seems to force a validation of this decision by convincing themselves that Darl is mad where he could perpetually act in his insane mindset and “[set] fire to the goddam

team and wagon” which would then affect the family in an even greater vain as they would lose more capital in the form of their “team and wagon.” In consequence, because his work is not useful, and in fact leads to the loss of capital, the artist must then be labeled mad to be removed from society (Faulkner 232-233).

This removal based on an “arbitrarily and communally defined” definition of madness imposed out of utilitarian and capitalistic necessity leads to the ultimate tragedy of the novel: the complete negation of the artist (Southard 59). Once Darl has been “[thrown]...down in the public street and handcuffed...like a damn murderer” to be taken away to Jackson so that he can get “better” he is left in a defeated state where he can only cynically “laugh” at the absurdity of the situation (Faulkner 240, 232, 238). Darl knows it is because he is an artist that he is left in this bitter state where he is laughing at the world for its arbitrary condemnation of him. However, the situation is no laughing matter. What at first seems like a mere removal of the artist from society descends into a deterioration of the artist’s character— Darl is left stripped of his individuality and refers to himself in the third-person, as seen when he says, “Darl has gone to Jackson.” That quote in particular sends chills down my spine, as a reader, especially in context where he begins exemplifying external signs of traditional psychopathic behavior when he maniacally continues on “laughing” long-after they have taken him away, and he obsessively repeats “Yes yes yes yes yes” as if he is all too aware of his situation. Therefore, when Darl states that “Darl has gone to Jackson,” first and foremost it shows a detachment, a removal of the individual, self-perceptive Darl from the external “Darl” who has now “gone to Jackson,” who has now descended into madness where he is stripped of his poetic power and creativity and left in the repetitive, and thereby not creative, cycle of “laughing” and repeating “Yes yes yes yes yes” (Faulkner 253-254). It’s as if with this new found insight into the ideological process of his society, once he sees that not only is he removed off arbitrary grounds, but that he will slowly deteriorate in this process, Darl then submits to the role of the madman, the “pure crazy” soul as he laughs away—perhaps in an attempt to expose the irony of a situation where is sent away to receive help whilst in reality he descends into madness (Faulkner 233, 238). And so society takes the artist, that “poet...diviner, [and] forseer” who seeks to create new, better realities for society, because it perceives them and their work as “queer” and “lazy,” or anti-capitalistic, removes the artist under the ideological label of madness “arbitrarily” composed, and leaves him to exist in that ideological confine to truly become mad (Sydney 2, Faulkner 24, Southard 59). Ultimately, then, it is only in this state of madness, removed from society, that Darl as a creative force proves no threat to the capitalist project of his former society. He cannot burn any barns in the name of empathy, he cannot use his eloquent language to interiorly define reality as he pleases. And so he can no

longer interrupt the capitalist project. He can no longer re-define the work-based reality that supersedes creativity and basic human empathy.

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