

An Ecofeminist Interpretation of *As I Lay Dying*

Shuhua Hou¹

¹ The Open University of Sichuan

Correspondence: Shuhua Hou, The Open University of Sichuan, China.

Received: September 25, 2023

Accepted: November 12, 2023

Online Published: November 17, 2023

doi:10.5539/ells.v13n4p56

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n4p56>

Abstract

As I Lay Dying, published in 1930, one of William Faulkner's best works, depicts Addie Bundren's burial journey to Jefferson. Faulkner told a thought-provoking story of how Bundren suffered and endured trials of flood and fire. Critics have commented extensively on this novel, especially regarding its multiple points of view and stream of consciousness. Ecofeminism combines ecology and feminist literary criticism that originated in the 1970s, emphasizes biocentrism and biodiversity, and rejects the oppression of both women and nature. *As I Lay Dying* is rich in descriptions of patriarchy, nature, and women, so I adopt an ecofeminist approach to interpret the novel from these perspectives and explore the ecofeminist thought and consciousness embodied in the novel.

Keywords: ecofeminism, *As I Lay Dying*, patriarchy, nature, women

As I Lay Dying, first published in 1930, is one of William Faulkner's best works. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. Since its publication, critics have commented extensively on the novel, especially regarding its multi-viewpoint and stream of consciousness. Substantial research and criticism laid a solid foundation for the interpretation of *As I Lay Dying*. In *A Good Carpenter: Cash Bundren's Quest for Balance and Authority*, Todd (2013) showed that Addie Bundren rejected patriarchal authority, whereas Cash Bundren was devoted to the ideal of balance and authority and whose efforts helped Anse Bundren reclaim his position of authority within the family at the end of the novel. Bollinger (2015) commented in *Embodied Cognition in As I Lay Dying* that Faulkner occasionally posited a fusion of bodies and minds in a way beyond dualism and more nearly in embodied cognition. The balance of power and authority, the fusion of bodies and minds beyond dualism, coincided with the main idea of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism combines ecology and feminist literary criticism that originated in the 1970s, emphasizes biocentric and biodiversity, and rejects the oppression of women and nature. Some Chinese scholars of ecologism advocated bio-holistic ideas based on Chinese Taoism, in which the balance of yin-yang is the basic rule of the world. Taoism coincides with the main principles of ecofeminism, although it precedes the latter by several thousands of years. I devote this paper to interpreting *As I Lay Dying* from the ecofeminist perspective to find the new meanings implied in the novel.

Ecofeminism is first used by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her *Le Feminisme ou la mort* (1974). As the term implies, it combines ecocriticism and feminist perspective and opposes anthropocentrism and patriarchy. Ecofeminism is gaining more and more attention in Western countries and has had considerable influence in recent years in the background of environmental degradation and global pandemics such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and COVID-19.

The 2013 collected volume *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, edited by Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok, and Serpil Oppermann, is a milestone for its development and spread (p. 2). Gates (1996) in *A Root of Ecofeminism* reemphasizes that ecofeminism advocates a biocentric rather than anthropocentric viewpoint, appreciates the intrinsic value of everything in nature, and opposes dualisms like male/female, thought/action, and spiritual/natural (p. 14). Ecofeminist values oppose all forms of hierarchy and domination (Gaard, 2010).

From the myriad explanations of ecofeminism, it can be regarded as a criticism method in literature mainly concerning equality between genders, examining the associations between women and nature, and opposing any domination including patriarchy and hierarchy. The description of women, nature, patriarchy, and hierarchy in *As I Lay Dying* has some connections with the major ecofeminist principles, so, that is why ecofeminism is applied to interpret this novel.

1. Patriarchy in *As I Lay Dying*

The Bundren family is deeply influenced by the traditional patriarchal system. Addie's father, Addie's husband Anse, and her eldest son Cash play the role of patriarch. However, Addie tries her best to subvert the patriarchal system. First influenced by her father's idea that "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (Faulkner, p. 90), Addie holds a pessimistic view of life before and after marriage, which can be interpreted as the reason that she is unable to love her husband Anse and the reason for her premature death, just as Addie's statement "to me, there was no beginning nor ending to anything then." The secular view of life is that birth is the beginning while death is the ending of life. Addie believes that her father is right throughout her life, even though she asks Anse to take her back to Jefferson when she is dead as her revenge on Anse because she can stay together with her family forever rather than with Anse.

Addie is deeply influenced by her father. Of the fifty-nine monologues, Addie only accounts for one monologue, in which she recalls her maiden age under the influence of her father, her encounter with Anse, her adultery with the minister Whitefield, and her idea about word's uselessness. In Addie's only monologue, she recalls her father's idea about life and death twice, which is the source of her pessimistic attitude towards life and marriage. After marriage, Addie is disappointed with her husband Anse and she thinks Anse is dead in her heart. She expects to get some consolation from local minister Whitfield, who is a reverend minister. However, Whitfield conceals the secret of adultery with Addie until Addie's death, and he reveals his sin to God on the way to the Bundren house. Addie believes that word is useless, so she says little. Todd (2013) proposes that "Addie uses the impotency of language to invert the patriarchal power structure of her world" (p. 49). But fundamentally, Addie admits Anse's patriarchal position in that "I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them. I did not even ask him for what he could have given me: not-Anse. That was my duty to him, to not ask that, and that duty I fulfilled" (Faulkner, p. 93). Addie believes that she should give birth to children for Anse who can keep his promise to bury her in her family clan at Jefferson.

Anse plays the role of the patriarch in the family, especially during the burial journey. When their mules are drowned during the flood, Anse decides to use Jewel's beloved horse to exchange for two new mules. When Cash's leg is broken, Anse fixes the broken leg with cement although it is a foolish action. When they consider digging the hole for the coffin, they find they have forgotten the spade, Darl and Jewel suggest buying one, but Anse, to save money, borrows two spades along the way. In every crucial moment, Anse plays the decisive part in leading the family members on the burial journey. Even before Addie dies, Anse delays sending for a doctor because on one aspect, he is unwilling to spend money and on the other, he doesn't think Addie's disease is so serious.

Cash, the eldest and faithful son of his mother Addie, pursues perfectness and balance when making the coffin for his mother because he is aware of the imbalance caused by her mother's subversion of the patriarchal authority. Darl, omniscient in this novel, is one of the most criticized characters. He knows his mother's adultery, his father's taking away Cash's money, and Dewey Dell's money. His rebellion against the burial even his arson is balanced by Anse, Cash, and Jewel, who unwaveringly continue the journey. Darl believes the burial journey is crazy, so he sets fire to the barn where his mother's coffin is, which causes the loss of the owner Gillespie. Darl's seemingly irrational action can be interpreted as his opposition to the patriarchal family authority because Anse and the firstborn child Cash spare no effort to prepare and fulfill the burial mission. Cash precisely prepares every plank before his mother, and makes the angle, bevel, and slope nearly perfect. Even though one leg is broken when crossing the flood, Cash still endures to continue the burial journey. Many neighbors along the way to Jefferson suggest Anse stop the burial task because the smelly corpse drew several eagles to the coffin, even the policemen come to see what happened.

Despite various hardships, led by Anse, the Bundren family finishes the burial mission successfully. Two rebellious members against the patriarchy go somewhere they have no right and chance to rebel, namely, Addie to the tomb, and Darl to Jackson madhouse. All family members' money is captured by Anse to buy dentures and find a new Mrs. Bundren. The family continues the tranquil life with the winter sunshine and gramophone music.

2. Nature, and Women

There is a large amount of description of nature in the whole novel. During the burial journey, the Bundren family endure such difficulties as flood and fire, which are important natural elements with symbolic meanings. Ecofeminist criticism is concerned with the description of nature in literary works. Faulkner's concern with nature and women is evident in *As I Lay Dying* although ecofeminism appeared in the 1970s.

In Addie's only chapter, she is associated closely with nature. Nature has been endowed with power for Addie. She often "goes down the hill to the spring where she could be quiet" (Faulkner, p. 90). "Sometimes I would lie

by him (Anse) in the dark, hearing the land that was now of my blood and flesh” (Faulkner, p. 92). Ecofeminist advocates that the oppression of women is closely related to the oppression of nature, as the above-cited ecofeminist values oppose all forms of hierarchy and domination. Addie tries to find the outlet in nature for the subordination and oppression from life, actually from her father and her husband. After marriage, Addie still feels lonely and hopes to find some consolation from Whitefield, a local minister. She waits for the minister in the woods and commits adultery with him. Her action can be interpreted as a subversion to the patriarchy, while nature plays the important role of medium.

Addie’s daughter Dewey Dell and the young man Lefe are picking up cotton in the field and getting closer and closer to the woods. She commits the same adultery as her mother. Lefe is so irresponsible about her pregnancy that he gives Dewey Dell ten dollars to buy the abortion medicine. Finally, the money is taken away by her father for his dentures. Dewey Dell and her mother Addie are tragic female characters under the patriarchal system with the same tragic fate. Their challenge to the patriarchy both occurs in nature and endures by themselves because Whitefield conceals the secret until Addie’s death, and Lefe doesn’t shoulder the responsibility after his adultery with Dewey Dell.

Flood and fire are two important elements of nature, which are disasters the Bundren family endures during their burial journey. Addie said: “He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me” (Faulkner, p. 89). Addie’s coffin does suffer the trials of flood and fire. The bridge is washed away and there are no other roads to go to Jefferson, therefore, they have to cross the river rivaling with the water current. Finally, Cash’s leg is broken and their mules drown, which is a real trial. Faulkner uses consecutive four chapters to describe the scene in which the Bundren family crosses the river with great difficulties. The flood disaster shows Faulkner’s concern with the relationship between nature and human beings. For the American South peasants like the Bundren family, nature provides all the necessities and meanwhile causes great trials for their burial journey. “Leopold’s land ethic proposes an extension of traditional ethics (which regulates behavior among humans), to include a respect for the biotic community” (Craig, 2011, p. 297). Leopold’s land ethic proposes ecological holism and respect for the biotic community. In Leopold’s land ethic, human exploits the land and gets economic profit, but few realize the respect for it. Therefore, the flood disaster during their burial journey can be interpreted as the result of an imbalance in the ecosystem.

Addie is not a true mother in Cora’s opinion, while Cora plays the role of a good woman. “I (Cora) have tried to live right in the sight of God and man, for the honor and comfort of my Christian husband and the love and respect of my Christian children” (Faulkner, p. 11). “She (Addie) has had a hard life, but so does every woman” (Faulkner, p. 89). Cora saves the eggs and bakes the cake, but it does not sell well. She always calls her husband Mr. Tull every time she mentions him. Cora devotes all her life to her husband and children. Before Addie dies, she comes to comfort Addie every day and expects the same for herself. “But thank God it will be the faces of my loved kin, my blood, and flesh, for in my husband and children I have been more blessed than most, trials though they have been at times” (Faulkner, p. 11). Cora puts herself in a subordinate position in her family to play the role of a good mother who is invisibly dominated by the patriarchy.

In the novel, there are 59 monologues named after 15 characters, only three female characters, namely, Addie and her daughter Dewey Dell, and their neighbor Cora. Obviously, women account for the minority of the characters in the novel, and they are deeply influenced by the patriarchal system, and even fall victim to it. Women’s voices are very limited throughout the whole novel. In some sense, this is Faulkner’s patriarchal idea embodied in his works. “Women have been reduced to the status of a minority by a male-dominated society, although their importance in terms of numbers, and even more significantly in terms of reproduction, should have permitted them a dominant role in society” (Barbara, 1996, p. 9). Addie even believes that word is no use, so she only occupies one chapter although the novel is about her burial journey to Jefferson. In the first half of the twentieth century when Faulkner lived, women’s status in the countryside was still very low due to the long-time influence of logocentrism and patriarchy, which is reflected in *As I Lay Dying*. After World War I, prosperous development in cities in the United States formed a striking comparison with the rural areas. The American South kept the original agricultural production mode and most peasants lived a hard life, therefore the Bundren family was no exception. Women’s social status is closely related to the development of society—the more developed the society, the higher the status of women, and vice versa.

In the whole novel, female characters all live the worst lives compared with male characters in the family status. They are weak in voice and power, but closely connected to nature. In this sense, we can infer ecofeminist philosophy in this novel although William Faulkner did not know what ecofeminism was during his period. The detailed depiction of women and nature in this novel can be interpreted as Faulkner’s concern for women’s

status.

3. The Hierarchy and Quest

As I Lay Dying like Homer's *Odyssey*, the Bundren family overcomes many obstacles during their burial journey to Jefferson. During their journey, every Bundren member has his or her intention or quest. Whether they can achieve their intention depends on the family members' status, which can be regarded as the family hierarchy. Anse and his eldest son Cash dominate the family, and finally get satisfied, while others fail. The family members can be divided into the strong represented by Anse and Cash, and the weak, the other five members.

Jefferson is a town with many commodities. The disparity in economic development between villages and towns is apparent in *As I Lay Dying*. In the 1930s, villages, and towns emerged strikingly unbalanced development in this novel. The Bundren family, as the epitome of poor peasants, lived a hard life and their only income source was the land. The ecological holistic idea, as the major source of ecofeminism, emphasizes the balance of the whole ecosystem. In this novel, the town's development is more prosperous than the village, mainly depicted before their journey and their arrival in Jefferson. For example, in the second chapter, Cora saves eggs to bake some cake but fails to sell out because the town's women cancel their party. Peasants' poor life can be perceived by Cora's neighbor Kate's repetition – "she ought to take those cakes" (Faulkner, pp. 3-4) four times.

The Bundren members have different intentions when they get to Jefferson. Anse has the intention to buy dentures to realize his body's completeness by taking his children's money, and unexpectedly, he gets a new Mrs. Bundren, a duck-shaped woman to restore the family's completeness. Cash hopes to buy a graphophone to listen to music when doing carpentry. Fortunately, Anse and Cash, as the strong representatives of the hierarchy, are satisfied after the burial mission. However, other family members don't get what they want. Dewey Dell wants to buy abortion medicine to stop her conception but fails. Vardaman fails to buy the toy car he desires for a long time. Darl opposes the burial journey, and finally, he is sent to the Jackson asylum due to his arson and irrational action according to the Bundren family's patriarch concept. To some degree, this can be interpreted as the oppression of the weak. The family members' hierarchy is obvious during their burial journey, which is opposed by the ecofeminism principle.

4. Conclusion

The limited voice and power of female characters in *As I Lay Dying* is apparent. Through the interpretation of women's oppression and their close connection with nature implied in this novel, Faulkner's critique of the male-dominated system and his concern for women and nature is obvious.

The interpretation of *As I Lay Dying* from the ecofeminist approach is helpful to understand the ecofeminist consciousness embodied in the work, and then is beneficial to build a harmonious, equal, and interdependent world between nature and human, man and woman, just as Barbara T. Gates mentioned that "Ecofeminists around the globe are working diligently to effect changes in attitudes toward women and nature that may in turn promote the survival of all people, other living creatures, and the earth itself" (1996, p. 15). The equality of all living creatures and the ecological system is a tendency advocated by ecofeminism.

5. Discussion

Modern ecofeminism presents different branches and different beliefs or principles. Its meaning will be richer and wider as the ecological and feminist development. However, this paper only explores patriarchy, nature, women, and the hierarchy embodied in *As I Lay Dying* based on the major ecofeminism principles. It is so limited in research depth in terms of ecofeminism and *As I Lay Dying* that much more relevant research is needed on this topic in the future.

Acknowledgments

I greatly appreciate the valuable contributions of my postgraduate supervisor Rixin Zha. I would also like to thank my colleagues who took the time to give me some suggestions in manuscript preparation.

Authors contributions

Not applicable

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

References

- Bollinger, L. (Winter 2015). Are is too many for one woman to foal: Embodied Cognition in *As I Lay Dying*. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 57(4), 433–463. <https://doi.org/10.7560/TSLL57403>
- Craig, S. (2011). Land Ethic? What Land Ethic? *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 14(3), 297–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2011.605857>
- Faulkner, W. (2016). *As I Lay Dying*. Beijing: Chinese Translation Press.
- Gaard, G. (Autumn 2010). New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 17(4), 643–665. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isq108>
- Gates, B. T. (Summer 1996). A Root of Ecofeminism: Ecoféminisme. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 3(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/3.1.7>
- Morita, K. (2014). Ecocriticism and Gender/Sexuality Studies: A Book Review Article on New Work by Azzarello and Gaard, Estok, and Oppermann. *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 16(4), Book Review Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2578>
- Todd, J. S. (fall 2013). Cash Bundren's Quest for Balance and Authority. *The Southern Literary Journal*, 46(1), 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/slj.2013.0020>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).