A HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND AUTONOMY IN FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

by

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In the 1930 quintessential American modernist novel, *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner tells the story of a poor family, the Bundrens, living in the Deep South. The novel follows fifteen separate narrators, including all seven family members, as the children and husband of Addie Bundren transport her body to a town forty miles away so she can be laid to rest. Particularly interesting is the novel's portrayal of gender, and more specifically reproduction, which centers around the two characters of Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren and themes of sexual and reproductive autonomy. This thesis interrogates the central theme of women's reproductive rights and autonomy in the novel by synthesizing the disciplines of history and English. It contextualizes close readings of the text in terms of the twentieth century national birth control and abortion movements, attitudes towards women's reproductive rights in the US, and the lived experiences of specifically poor rural white southern women. This contextualization clarifies how the book responds and reacts to the contexts in which it was written and which it portrays, thus illuminating how the novel illustrates the convergence of literature and history. The novel depicts the oppression of women, including the abuse of Addie Bundren's dead body by her mostly male family, criticism towards Dewey

Dell's pregnancy, and her rape, among other issues. Given Faulkner's identity, it is possible to view him as an ally to the male oppressors in the novel. Many prior critics support this viewpoint. My thesis, however, argues that Faulkner constructs the women in the story as moral centers and uses the novel to illuminate and raise awareness for women's reproductive struggle in this time period. The historical lens helps to support this counterargument by providing the context that shows that the portrayals of women and their oppression in this time are historically sensitive and accurate, while also avoiding falling into stereotypical or misogynistic representations of women in the Deep South. By using this historical and textual evidence, this investigation proves that Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* presents significant and progressive claims about the reproductive experiences of women in the time period, thus challenging current ideas of Faulkner's gender politics and the assumption that his identity restricted him from producing an early feminist work. On a broader scale, the thesis shows how literature can be read as a historical document, and how history can be used to contextualize and deepen understanding of the politics and themes that appear in literature.

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Introduction

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is one of the author's most frequently taught and studied novels. The novel follows fifteen separate narrators, including the seven members of the Bundren family. The plot focuses on the family's forty-mile journey to bury their recently deceased mother in Jefferson where her family is buried. The story takes place in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County which is his fictional construction of his home-state of Mississippi in the years between World War I and II. With its stream of consciousness narration and innovative formal features, it interrogates themes such as the abject hopelessness of the human condition, the debilitating mental and physical effects of poverty, and the effects of the patriarchal society of the southern US on women in an original and compelling literary style.

The two main female characters in the novel are Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren. Addie Bundren is the mother of the five Bundren children. She dies early in the novel as a result of her ceaseless labor for the family, and the rest of the novel focuses on her family transporting her decaying remains to be buried in Jefferson. The only chapter she narrates takes place after her death on the family's journey to Jefferson, and centers on her reproductive struggle. The chapter begins with an expression of her natural drive to reproduce, which shifts to a feeling of desperation and lack of control once she is forced to carry and give birth to children that she feels are her husband, Anse's, and not hers. To recover her reproductive power, she has an affair with local minister Whitfield, which results in the birth of her favorite son, Jewel. Sixteen-year-old Dewey Dell Bundren is the only female sibling in the Bundren family. Early in the novel she reveals that her boyfriend, Lafe, impregnates her after pressuring

her into having sex in the fields. Her primary motivation in the novel is to get an abortion, which she hopes to get once the family reaches Jefferson. In the end, instead of an abortion she gets raped by a man claiming to help her and is set to return home with the pointless hope that it worked. These two female characters represent the lived reality of women in this period struggling with their lack of reproductive autonomy due to an insufficiency of knowledge of and access to effective birth control and safe abortion. They are constructed along the lines of the specific intersecting identities of being abjectly poor white women living in the Deep South. These women's lived and reproductive experiences were additionally shaped by further restricted autonomy and access to information, as well as the southern patriarchy and the prominent role physical work played in their lives.

Literature Review

Scholarship about Faulkner's works and their representation of gender demonstrate a large range of interpretations of Faulkner's gender politics, some claiming they are problematic, some claiming they are progressive, and most falling somewhere in the middle. They all primarily use close reading and analysis of other scholars' works to make their arguments, although many also incorporate gender and feminist theory, while a few use historical contextualization to make their claims. Only a few scholars have given significant attention to his portrayal of women's reproductive struggles and autonomy in *As I Lay Dying*. An analysis of this previous literature reveals the gaps in scholarship on Faulkner's gender politics that this investigation fills.

My thesis builds on Jill Bergman's treatment of the novel. She specifically focuses on Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren and the question of gender and sexuality in

"'This Was the Answer to It': Sexuality and Maternity in *'As I Lay Dying.'*"[1] Bergman examines past scholarship on Faulkner that argues his gender approaches are problematic due to his reduction of women to only sexual beings, even if the sexuality they represent is progressive, and synthesizes this with scholarship that argues that Faulkner's gender representations are progressive in general. Bergman argues that the truth is somewhere in between: to some extent the novel's gender representations are problematic and to some extent they are progressive. Bergman's article offers a typical example of previous literature on Faulkner's gender representation in terms of sexuality but is limited because it neglects an evaluation of historical context.

Another work of criticism that focuses primarily on sexuality is Cinda Gault's "The Two Addies: Maternity and Language in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women."[2] Gault investigates the power Faulkner gives Addie before and after her death and compares *As I Lay Dying* to Monro's late 20th century feminist novel. Gault analyzes how Faulkner invests Addie's character with certain power and authority and defies the gender traditions of the time by portraying Addie as a sexual character through her participation in an affair, while still allowing her to maintain her relationship with her family and husband. Gault also shows how Faulkner explores the language of maternity in a progressive way that uses some of the same theory and logic as contemporary feminist representations of motherhood. At the same time, however, Gault identifies the limitations of Faulkner's representations of

[1] Jill Bergman, "'This Was the Answer to It': Sexuality and Maternity in 'As I Lay Dying,'" *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1996): 393-407, www.jstor.org/stable/26475646.

[2] Cinda Gault, "The Two Addies: Maternity and Language in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying and Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women," *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 440-57.

women. First, Gault contends that Faulkner only allows Addie to speak and tell her truth after she is dead; he does not allow her to stay a living woman who transcends these gender expectations and maintains power over her family and body. In contrast, I read the fact that Addie's chapter is narrated after her death as progressive and effective, because it enables her chapter to have a reflective style in which she looks back on and responds to her maternal and reproductive experience after her death. This perspective allows for her to say things she may not have wanted or been able to say in life and gives her the power of post-death reflection and expression that is not possible for real women. Second, Gault stresses how Dewey Dell inherits her mother's struggles and the loss of autonomy that comes with motherhood. This repetition, according to Gault, implies that the oppression of women is perpetual and inevitable. I argue, on the other hand, that Dewey Dell is aware of this oppression, and that her awareness allows her to progressively exert some agency over her situation despite her general lack of autonomy.

Other scholars have interpreted Faulkner's gender representations as inherently problematic. Liam Butchart's "Death, Mourning, and Human Selfishness: Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* Through a Freudian Lens," for example, focuses on the problematic construction of Dewey Dell.[3] Butchart analyzes Faulkner's construction of the psychology of his characters, specifically their psychological reactions to Addie's death. Applying a Freudian theoretical lens, Butchart argues that their responses to their

[33] Liam C. Butchart, "Death, Mourning and Human Selfishness: Faulkner's As I Lay Dying Through a Freudian Lens," *PSYART* (2015): 52-67, https://psyart.org/article/death-mourning-and-human-selfishness-faulkners-as-i-lay-dying-through-a-freudian-lens/.

mother or wife's death reveal something about the human condition, specifically that people are inherently self-centered when faced with tragedies or hard times. Butchart argues that Dewey Dell's reaction may be the most selfish of all, because she is focused solely on her pregnancy and getting an abortion, whereas she does not seem to care at all about her mother's death. In contrast, I believe that Butchart's essay epitomizes how scholars misinterpret the gender representations in the novel and why they view Faulkner's gender politics as problematic. While Butchart claims that Dewey Dell is the most selfish Bundren child, I argue that Faulkner portrays Dewey Dell and the other women as the novel's moral centers. While Dewey Dell may seem the most selfish and the focused on personal gain, this portrayal actually works to show how women in this oppressive society are not given the time to grieve, or rest, when tragedy strikes. The demands for female labor, for reproduction, and the constrictions of southern womanhood placed on these women make it impossible for Dewey Dell to take time to grieve the passing of her mother. The labor and abuse that Addie endured that led to her death is immediately inherited by Dewey Dell with her mother's passing and explains why she must prioritize getting an abortion and is unable to process her grief.

Several works of previous criticism use a multidisciplinary methodology similar to the approach I take, contextualizing Faulkner's novel within its historical contexts. The work that is most like my thesis is H.E. Holcombe's "Faulkner on Feminine Hygiene, Or, How Margaret Sanger Sold Dewey Dell a Bad Abortion."[4] Holcombe contextualizes *As I Lay Dying* within the historical context of the U.S. birth control

[4] H.E. Holcombe, "Faulkner on Feminine Hygiene, Or, How Margaret Sanger Sold Dewey Dell a Bad Abortion," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 57.2 (2011): 203-29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287253.

movement led by Margaret Sanger, and the cultural and economic responses to this new reproductive rights movement. Holcombe provides a detailed survey of the birth control movement and uses the novel to show how Sanger's shift to advocating for only doctor prescribed birth control neglected the gendered realities of poverty and southern society. Using the cases of Dewey Dell, Addie, and Cora Tull, the Bundrens' neighbor, Holcombe argues that Faulkner's text closely and accurately exposes these geographic and socio-political limitations of the birth control movement, driven by the shifting economics of the movement. Despite focusing on fictional characters, Holcombe contends that Faulkner's portrayal of women's experiences accurately reflects the experiences of women in the South during this period. For example, Holcombe argues the rape of Dewey Dell symbolizes the violence and exploitation that the economic restrictions of birth control, like the Comstock Act, caused for many poor women. Like my thesis, Holcombe's article uses history to prove the progressive nature of Faulkner's gender construction; however, it does not study the history or the text as extensively as I do. In addition, Holcomb's article takes an approach focused on economics, while I use a more intersectionally driven historical approach focused on an analysis of primary sources from the time of the novel's publication. Nonetheless, Holcombe's article provides a good jumping-off point for my thesis to expand on, and I follow Holcombe in drawing on sources such as Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review* and Margaret Hagood's *Mothers of the South.*

The final critical work that informs my investigation is Ann Abadie and Donald Kartiganer's *Faulkner and Gender*.[5] This volume comprises several different articles on Faulkner and gender. Roughly half of the articles focus on a broad evaluation of gender in Faulkner's works, or some concept connected to gender, and the other half focus on gender in specific Faulkner texts. The essays express a range of opinions on Faulkner's gender politics, from reading them as progressive examples of early feminism, to reading them as problematic and a product of the Southern patriarchy that Faulkner was born, raised, and wrote in. Many of the articles use recent gender and feminist theory to evaluate Faulkner and his texts, and a few rely on historical contextualization as well, but not to a great extent. Overall, *Faulkner and Gender* provides a holistic survey of previous scholarship on Faulkner and gender, which helps me identify gaps in scholarship, as well as relevant scholarly controversies. But because none of them focuses on *As I Lay Dying* and reproduction, they reveal a key gap in scholarship that my thesis fills.

This previous literature provides supporting evidence for my arguments, opposing arguments to counter, and reveals other gaps in the scholarship that my thesis redresses. Together, this criticism confirms the value of my focused study of gender representations in *As I Lay Dying* within the historical context of the postbellum US South.

[5] Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Gender* (University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

A Historical Contextualization of Reproductive Rights and Autonomy in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying

This thesis contextualizes the experiences of Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren, and their distinct reproductive struggles, with historical accounts of the birth control and abortion movement both in the US broadly and in the South specifically. The historical context and analysis begins with an explanation of the broad historical trends in the reproductive rights movement and the media representation of this movement in primarily northern magazines and newspapers. I analyze magazine articles from popular women's magazine at the time, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Birth Control Review,* and newspaper articles printed in the same publications that reviewed Faulkner's novel to demonstrate the proximity and relevance of this neglected history for judging Faulkner's achievement. Next, the historical context shifts to focus on Faulkner as a southern man and writer and his role in the national and international literary community, which raises the question of whether *As I Lay Dying* is an essentially southern novel or not. Finally, I consider historical work on the experiences of poor southern white women in the early twentieth century, including modern works by historians of this period. Here I also rely heavily on Margaret Hagood's *Mothers of the South* which is invaluable as perhaps the only source that includes interviews with real women living in similar conditions to the characters in *As I Lay Dying.*

Next, I use my historical research to inform my close reading of *As I Lay Dying*. I begin with an analysis of Addie. I argue that the historical context reveals that Faulkner renders her in response to the media's creation of the suffering married mother whom advocates for birth control viewed as the only legitimate user of contraceptives.

Faulkner complicates this representation by constructing Addie as a poor white southern mother, whose life is characterized primarily by work and lack of autonomy. Most important, he subverts this representation of Addie as a respectable suffering mother through her affair with Whitfield, while simultaneously representing her as a moral center of the novel despite this affair. The affair with Whitfield allows Addie to exercise some form of sexual and reproductive autonomy in a world that tries to completely rob her of it. With the character of Dewey Dell, Faulkner ostensibly creates a representation of the "promiscuous" unmarried woman whom both advocates and opponents of birth control did not want to allow access to birth control. He challenges the bias and ignorance of this construction by making Dewey Dell a victim - someone who deserves an abortion despite her unmarried status. Faulkner portrays Dewey Dell as a poor white southern girl in part to show how her victimhood is perpetuated and amplified by the lack of autonomy and inability to communicate about reproductive subjects that results from her lack of education and access to information. But as with Addie, Faulkner positions Dewey Dell as one of the moral centers of the novel by showing how she too exercises autonomy, despite her victimhood and the fact that her autonomy is limited more than her mother's. *As I Lay Dying* expresses a rich and sympathetic understanding of Dewey Dell's predicament. Faulkner's modernist stream-of-consciousness narrative contributes significantly to his ability to write about these issues: it enables him to speak through the characters, allowing readers to see into the thought-processes of every major character and illuminating depths not accessible in other characters' narrations of them.

Finally, I analyze the initial reception of the novel through book reviews published in popular literary magazines of the period. This method was inspired by Sarah Gardner's methodology, explained in the introduction to her book *Reviewing the South*, in which she analyzes book reviews of Southern novels to investigate the Southern Renaissance.[6] She reads these reviews as news, showing how Southern writers at the time began to challenge the norms and assumptions of the South. Gardner treats them as useful for historical study because they reflect the view of the periphery, those reading the books, not only the views of the authors, providing a more all-encompassing view of people's attitudes towards the themes and styles of the novels. This methodology is useful to my investigation for the same reasons: it reveals how *As I Lay Dying* and its themes of gender and reproduction were first received, and it more clearly reveals how progressively Faulkner's novel responds to and pushes back against dominant societal views towards women's reproduction.

This cross-contextualization of history and the novel reveal how *As I Lay Dying* is a progressive representation of reproductive rights and autonomy in the early twentieth century. It challenges the media's harmful constructions of women who are not worthy of birth control, dramatizing that every woman, even an unmarried woman like Dewey Dell, is worthy of it. *As I Lay Dying* also progressively contributes to larger period debates on birth control through characters who represent the people most in need of birth control but with the least access to it: poor rural southerners. It is most progressive because it sympathetically portrays two women whose sexual activities

[6] Sarah Gardner, Reviewing the South: The Literary Marketplace and the Southern Renaissance, 1920-1941 (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-13.

would be deemed immoral by "respectable" society, elevating Addie and Dewey Dell as the moral centers of the novel and characterizing them as strong and resilient, in defiance of the societal forces that restrict their autonomy.

My historical contextualization of *As I Lay Dying* also highlights the relationship between history and literature. The intricacies of Faulkner's representation of reproductive rights and autonomy can only be understood fully through the lens of historical contextualization. This contextualization reveals how the novel accurately and realistically represents important aspects of the national conversation on birth control at the time, and thus confirms Faulkner's significant contribution to the conversation. Additionally, my analysis reveals that *As I Lay Dying* can be read as a fictional historical document that conveys something true and intimate about this specific time in our past. In his female characters, Faulkner creates realistic and complex depictions of poor white southern women struggling with their reproductive rights and autonomy, fictional subjects who nonetheless illuminate period history. Given their regional and economic status, actual women like Addie and Dewey Dell did not leave many historical accounts behind, and thus represent an understudied group. Although fictional, *As I Lay Dying* provides sympathetic and convincing portrayals of the lives of such women. Throughout my thesis, I illustrate not only the importance of literature to historical study and vice versa, but also that Faulkner's text, although nearly a century old, is still useful to study for its innovative and progressive style and themes.

Chapter 1: Historical Background

In order to appreciate the ways that Faulkner constructs Dewey Dell and Addie in response to debates and movements about reproductive rights in the twentieth century, it is necessary to understand the historical context of the broader birth control and abortion movements, how these led to the development of the media constructions of the suffering mother deserving of birth control and the promiscuous unmarried woman undeserving of birth control, and the specific lived experiences of poor southern white women. These contexts will illuminate the ways that Faulkner reproduces and destabilizes dominant ideas about reproductive rights on a nationally and regionally specific level using these two characters in *As I Lay Dying.*

Birth Control

In 1873, Congress passed the Comstock Act, making the sale or distribution of information on birth control illegal and punishable with up to five years in prison and/or a $2000 fine.[1] The formal birth control movement was formed at least in part in response to this law.[2] The movement grew increasingly active when Congress raised the fine for violating the Comstock Act to up to $5000.[3] In 1914, the well-known birth control activist and leader of the birth control movement, Margaret Sanger, became involved. She wrote a pamphlet titled *Family Limitation*, meant to inform women of their options when it came to birth control. In the pamphlet, she explained methods that

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[1] Comstock Act; U.S. Congress, March 3, 1873, https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=017/llsl017.db&recNum=639.

[2] Alesha Doan, "Shifting Contexts - The History of Abortion in America," in Opposition and Intimidation: The Abortion Wars and Strategies of Political Harassment, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007; ProQuest Ebook Central): 40, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=3414527.

[3] Doan, "Shifting Contexts," 40.

had proven effective (for the time) at preventing pregnancy, including tracking one's period, douching with chemicals after intercourse, condoms, pessaries (similar to the ring), sponges, diaphragms, and vaginal suppositories (basically spermicide), all of which she claimed were available for prices ranging from 50 cents to $2.00 at drug stores.[4] Interestingly, Sanger also discussed the possibility of "coitus interruptus," now known colloquially as "pulling out," which she almost immediately dismisses as impractical due to the need for the "strongest will-power" on the part of the man.[5] The dismissal of this method that requires a man's participation shows that despite the generally feminist nature of the early birth control movement, advocates in the US still placed the responsibility primarily on women. She concluded the pamphlet with an explanation of the need for more widespread information about birth control: "To conserve the life of these mothers and to prevent the birth of diseased or defective children are factors emphasizing the crying need of a sound and sane educational campaign for birth control."[6] This assertion illustrates that Sanger aimed to center the movement around the health of mothers and their children.

By the 1920s, Sanger had switched her approach, which led the birth control movement to become more restrictive and less accessible to women of all backgrounds. In 1924, she began to push for legislation that would legalize birth control only if it was accessed through doctors. To go along with this effort, she launched Holland-Rantos, which was the first medical supply company in America to sell exclusively to doctors,

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[4] Margaret Sanger, Family Limitation, 5th ed., (New York, 1916; Nineteenth Century Collections Online): 4-16, link.gale.com/apps/doc/AZYULA053981725/NCCO?u=euge94201&sid=gale_marc&xid=b861fae2&pg=1.

[5] Sanger, Family Limitation, 6.

[6] Ibid.,16.

and she created the Koromex diaphragm for the company to sell to these doctors.[7] She fought to legitimize this product in the medical sphere, which helped to delegitimize other more accessible birth control methods, like condoms.[8] While Sanger ultimately succeeded in getting doctors to back certain products such as her diaphragm, her efforts not only discounted other viable options, but also left the Comstock Act unchallenged, which had disastrous effects for those still unable to access the knowledge they needed about birth control due to the restriction on information, especially poor rural women.[9]

When Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* was published in 1930, Sanger and many other birth control activists were still taking that approach. Thus in 1931, Sanger announced a bill to Congress "permitting doctors to give contraceptive information to their patients at their discretion, to publish such information in medical journals, and to send and receive it through the mails… The ban on contraceptive devices is also, by the proposed bill, to be lifted if their distribution is under the control of physicians or property licensed medical professionals."[10] If passed, this bill would have meant that the Comstock Act would no longer apply to medical professionals but remain intact for everyone else. Although any increase of access to information would help the poor and uneducated women who had access to little or no information beyond word of mouth, the lack of equal distribution of doctors, especially doctors who would now be referred

[7] Holcombe, "Faulkner on Feminine Hygiene," 207.
[8] Ibid.," 208.
[9] Ibid., 209.
[10] "Bill to be Introduced into Senate," The Nation, February 11, 1931, Vol. 132, No. 3423, p.143.

to as obstetrician-gynecologists, ensured that this bill would mostly benefit women in urban areas.[11]

The South was one of these areas where access to doctors, especially doctors who specialized in women's reproductive health, was extremely scarce.[12] This reality not only radically limited southern women's access to information about birth control, but also increased their need for it, since childbirth was far more dangerous for these women who did not have as much access to knowledgeable doctors to help them through pregnancy or delivery. These implications show that Sanger and the early birth control movement, while making progress toward increasing the knowledge and distribution of birth control for many women, largely abandoned poor, rural women by not actively working to overturn the Comstock Act or to increase the presence of clinics for women in less densely populated areas, like the South. The Comstock Act was not overturned until 1965 with the ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which found it unconstitutional to restrict one's access to birth control due to the right of privacy.[13]

Abortion

Abortion has been around in the United States since the colonial years. One of the earliest recorded cases is from 1742, documented through a court case. This case

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[11] Frederick L. Collins, "Expectant Mothers and Fathers," *Ladies' Home Journal* (Nineteenth Century Collections Online), January 1931, 23, https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/apps/doc/UVWVSW713437074/NCCO?u=euge94201&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=4b0941b7.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Sheraden Steward, "The Comstock Law (1873)," in Embryo Project Encyclopedia (January 13, 2009), https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/comstock-law-1873.

took place in Connecticut, where twenty-seven-year-old Amasa Sessions impregnated seventeen-year-old Sarah Gardner, and upon discovering she was pregnant, provided her with abortifacients to terminate the pregnancy.[14] These did not work, so Amasa located a doctor to perform an abortion on Sarah, which resulted in infection and Sarah's death just days later.[15] Years later, investigators identified Amasa as being the man involved in this case, and all charges against him were dropped.[16] This early example shows that even in abortion's earliest years, men were not held accountable for abortions while women often paid with their lives.[17]

Abortion remained relatively common until 1859, when the American Medical Association passed an anti-abortion resolution, discouraging women from getting abortions and doctors from performing them.[18] Intensifying those efforts, the Comstock Act restricted and criminalized "unlawful abortion" with the same punishments as birth control.[19] By the early 20th century, all states had passed statutes criminalizing abortion in all phases of pregnancy, with limited exceptions.[20] Although all the states had a different process of creating and passing these statues, some more documented than others, the results were all similar: "The typical early abortion statute punished the provision of abortifacients or the use of instruments to induce abortion, unless necessary to preserve the woman's life, by imprisonment of between one and twenty years."[21]

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[14] Doan, "Shifting Contexts," 42.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 40, 49.

[19] Comstock Act.

[20] Samuel W. Buell, "Criminal Abortion Revisited," *New York University Law Review* (1991): 1784, https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/faculty_scholarship/2174/; Doan, "Shifting Contexts," 51.

[21] Buell, "Criminal Abortion Revisited," 1784.

These statutes, once again, disproportionately affected poor women and women in rural areas. After the passage of the federal and state anti-abortion statutes, "Women who had access to necessary resources like money, transportation, and time continued to have abortions at approximately the same rate as they did before abortion was criminalized."[22] These conditions meant that the laws effectively only impacted poor women without these resources.

Sanger and the birth control movement did not focus much energy on abortion. In *Family Limitation*, Sanger described abortion to those who were not familiar with it, and summarized her opinion on the matter: "Any attempt to interfere with the development of the fertilized ovum is called an abortion. No one can doubt that there are times when an abortion is justifiable but they will become unnecessary when care is taken to prevent conception. This is the only cure for abortions."[23] This statement illustrates that while Sanger was not opposed to abortion in all cases, she believed that increased access to birth control would eliminate the need for it. Accordingly, neither she nor the rest of the birth control movement dedicated much effort to increasing access to abortion. Perhaps this relative lack of concern with abortion resulted from the fact that the early birth control movement was led by and aimed at wealthier, more privileged women who had the knowledge and resources to access abortions. Regardless, the movement did not prioritize equitable access to abortion or information about birth control, leaving poor women with limited knowledge of and access to any methods to control their own reproduction.

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[22] Doan, "Shifting Contexts," 51.

[23] Sanger, Family Limitation, 5.

After the passage of these anti-abortion laws in the late 1800s and early 1900s, abortion faded from the American public's attention. Although the media rarely covered abortion in these years, "The few stories that appeared across the country were mainly focused on the arrest of physicians who performed illegal abortions, not the women who sought abortion."[24] This scant and biased media attention ensured that limited public attention was directed to abortion, so few if any sustained efforts were made to challenge these laws. In the 1950s, the media directed attention back to abortion, sympathizing with the lack of access to abortion for some women, particularly poor women.[25] During the civil rights activism of the 1960s, the women's rights movement took up the issue of abortion, and aimed to normalize and demystify it. Abortion was finally legalized in 1973 with the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case. However, the debates have persisted, as the abortion access *Roe v. Wade* granted has been repeatedly threatened. Justice Alito's draft opinion shows it is currently being threatened by the Supreme Court.[26] Also, as recently as 2021 states have successfully limited the access to abortion promised by *Roe v. Wade*; the successfully passed Texas Heartbeat Act, for example, bans abortion after the detection of the fetus's heartbeat, occurring around week six of pregnancy.[27]

This historical background on the development of birth control and abortion access confirms that birth control and abortion had a long history before Faulkner's

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[24] Doan, "Shifting Contexts," 51.

[25] Ibid., 40.

[26] Thomas E. Dobbs, State Health Officer of the Mississippi Department of Health v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, No. 19-1392 (2022), https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/02/read-justice-alito-initial-abortion-opinion-overturn-roe-v-wade-pdf-00029504.

[27] Senate Bill No. 8; Texas, US, March 11, 2021, https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/87R/billtext/pdf/SB00008H.pdf.

writing and publication of *As I Lay Dying* in 1930. It also shows that debates around birth control were prominent in the public sphere directly around the time of the novel's publication, which means that Faulkner, as well his readers, might well have had women's reproductive rights at the forefront of their minds when it first came out. This historical background contextualizes *As I Lay Dying*, illuminating that Dewey Dell's search for an abortion, as well as Addie's reproductive journey as a mother, are Faulkner's contributions to the debate surrounding women's reproductive rights in the 1930s. At the same time, the novel contextualizes this historical moment by providing fictional, but realistic, representations of poor women in the South who suffered as a result of legislation and the exclusivity of the birth control movement that disproportionately limited their knowledge of and access to methods of controlling their reproductive autonomy.

The Suffering Mother and the Promiscuous Unmarried Woman

When *As I Lay Dying* was published in 1930, debates about birth control had again become prevalent in America. Prominent religious groups began to take an aggressive public stance on birth control. The articles written in this time about birth control, especially as it relates to the decisions of these churches, reveal that a key question centered in the debate was whether increasing access to birth control would encourage promiscuous relations between unmarried people that were either illegal, condemned by the church and society more broadly, or both. Even the more progressive side advocating for increased access to birth control worried about this problem, because they too only wanted birth control to be accessible to married women.

Although this desire to gatekeep birth control was never explicitly stated, it is obvious in the pieces written about this debate at the time. For example, an article published in the September 1931 issue of *Birth Control Review,* a progressive magazine that Sanger founded and edited, explains, "So with contraceptive devices: because there are irresponsible people who would take advantage of an opportunity to obtain such devices to prevent the natural consequences of their illegal acts, all married women must continue to suffer…"[28] The article acknowledges that a main reason birth control had not been legalized is because these "irresponsible" individuals would use it in order to evade pregnancy, "the natural consequence of their illegal act." Arguments like this pit this imagined group of irresponsible people against the suffering mothers who did not have access to birth control for avoiding pregnancy for reasons deemed acceptable, and blamed these people for being the cause of opposition to pro-birth control legislation.

Additionally, the progressive magazine *The Nation* addressed this debate in response to the Federal Council of Churches Committee on Marriage and the Home approving the use of birth control in April 1931:

> This is temperate, sensible, enlightened… [Many thousands of persons] will agree with the committee's answer to the time-honored objection that a widespread knowledge of contraceptives will result in promiscuous relations. The committee feels that such relations will not be indulged by most people. They might have added that not only the Catholic Church but the whole face of society is set against promiscuity; that irregular relations antedate contraceptives and will postdate them; and that the good afforded to the many by the proper knowledge of their use will wipe out the 'illicit pleasure' they will afford to few.[29]

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[28] George Packard, "Is Birth Control Legal?" Birth Control Review, September 1931, 248.

[29] "On the Church's Approval of Birth Control," The Nation, April 1, 1931, Vol. 132, No. 3430, p.341.

This excerpt reveals the central aspects and points on both sides of this issue. The base of the argument is that everyone was against promiscuity. Those who opposed birth control, including the Roman Catholic Church, were against it because they believed it would increase promiscuous sexual relations, or relations outside of marriage. Those who advocated for increased birth control argued that these relations had always happened and always would, and that the number of those who would use contraceptives for promiscuous sexual relations was not significant compared to the many people who would benefit from their use. The prevalence of articles like these and their articulations of the debate evoked two contrasting images of the women who would use birth control if it were to be legalized: suffering mothers wanting to limit their family size, and promiscuous, irresponsible women wanting to have sex outside of marriage for enjoyment. Such evidence confirms that the birth control movement in the 1930s was fighting for married privileged women, and it stigmatized and alienated other women who wanted or needed birth control for other reasons.

Understandably, women seeking access to information about birth control in this era internalized and reinforced the stereotypes of the two opposing kinds of women this debate imagined. *Birth Control Review* regularly printed letters from women pursuing information on birth control. Such letters illuminate how real women subscribed to and reproduced the image of the suffering, married mother: "I have been married for eight years and I have been very happy. I am the proud mother of four lovely children. Of course I love my children very dearly but I do not feel that I am able physically to bear another child nor do my husband and myself feel that we can afford another child."[30]

[30] "Birth Control - A Constructive Force," Birth Control Review, February 1930, 35.

This woman opens her letter with a statement confirming that she is married and therefore in the appropriate situation to be seeking information on birth control. She affirms that she is a good mother by characterizing herself as "proud," and as "[loving] her children very dearly." She also characterizes herself as suffering by claiming her body could not handle carrying and birthing another child, and that they cannot afford it. Another woman describes herself similarly:

> I am the mother of two children, have been pregnant three times and taught school two years for our living all in seven years of married life. I love these baby boys with all my heart and I want to give them opportunities to get an education and become useful citizens, but I don't want other babies, one a year until I am too worn out to live or die… I haven't had a new coat in five years, nor a dress decent for church wear in three.[31]

This mother similarly states her married status and constructs herself as a good mother by stating her love for her boys, and her hopes for their future. She also characterizes herself as religious, and therefore more respectable still, by including the detail of her church dress. The woman also signals her suffering through the inclusion of her having to work while raising the children, and her lack of financial ability to buy new clothes. She notes the impacts on her body as well, claiming she wants birth control so that she does not have to have a child every year "until [she is] too worn out to live or die." The writers of these letters illustrate how the birth control movement's creation of the two opposing types of women, and the pitting of these types against each other, resulted in women seeking information about and access to birth control having to construct and present themselves in terms of the stereotype of the suffering mother in order to be deemed worthy of birth control.

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[31] "Birth Control - A Constructive Force," 35.

A letter from another woman seeking birth control, printed in *Birth Control Review* in May 1930, reinforces the point by giving voice to a woman who fears she falls into the category of the promiscuous woman: "You may not believe that I am married, but I sure am. My age is sixteen and I already have a baby boy… I beg you to advise me, for I am so young… As I am writing this letter, I am crying because I can just imagine how I am going to be tied down with all the children, so young as I am."[32] This young mother feels even more pressure to convey that she is married, since she is so young, and she voices the fear that her youth will lead people to believe that she is one of the women who partakes in sexual relations outside of marriage and wants access to birth control to prevent herself from getting pregnant again. She too constructs herself as a suffering mother, but with a heightened voice of desperation compared to the other mothers. She expresses great distress at the thought of her youth being ruined by the inability to control her reproduction. Although it is impossible to know if this is the case, the letter reads almost like that of a woman who did engage in sex outside of marriage who is now trying to represent herself as a respectable, suffering, married woman, to gain access to information about birth control. These letters show how women described themselves with certain characteristics to fit into the mold of the suffering, respectable mother who was considered worthy of birth control, rather than the undeserving, irresponsible, promiscuous unmarried woman not wanting to get pregnant outside of marriage. Moreover, because publications like *Birth Control Review* would only publish letters like these, the women's self-representations continued to reify the images of the opposing women searching for information on and access to

[32] "In the Day's Mail," Birth Control Review, March 1930, 72.

birth control, so that these female stereotypes were more firmly ingrained in people's minds when thinking about the birth control debate.

Faulkner As a Southern Author

These constructions of the types of women searching for birth control were products of the larger national conversations about birth control at the time of the publication of *As I Lay Dying.* Although Faulkner might well have been aware of these national conversations, he was certainly aware of the more specific regional context surrounding birth control for poor southern white women, like Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren. It is worthwhile to spend a moment considering Faulkner as a southern man and author, and how this regional context contributed to his ability to understand and write about both the national struggles for reproductive autonomy in the early twentieth century, and the distinct struggle of the women like Addie and Dewey Dell whose lives were shaped by their intersectional identities as abjectly poor, southern, rural, and white.

A southern man through and through, Faulkner was born in Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897.[33] When he was just over a year old, his family moved to another small town, Ripley, Mississippi.[34] Shortly after this, the family again moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where he was raised and would spend the majority of his life.[35] Although larger than Albany or Ripley, Oxford was nevertheless largely agricultural, less industrialized and modernized than the North, and was, of course, located in the

[33] Robert W. Hamblin, Myself and the World: A Biography of William Faulkner (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 12.

[34] Ibid., 12.

[35] Ibid.

heart of the post-Civil War post-Reconstruction Jim Crow South.[36] The Faulkners belonged to the class of landowning white southerners whose economic status was in decline.[37] The Faulkners were by no means as poor as the Bundrens (they could still afford to hire a black servant, Caroline Barr, to work for the family), but they also felt the effects of the South falling behind the rest of the country economically.[38] Faulkner held many jobs in Oxford over the course of his life, including working as a postmaster at the University of Mississippi and shoveling coal at the University's powerplant (his job when he wrote *As I Lay Dying*). Eventually, he bought a farm where he worked and developed his self-proclaimed identity as "a farmer who likes to tell stories."[39] Working at this range of jobs exposed Faulkner to the lives of many types of people in the South, which helped him develop the characters that would populate the fictional Yoknapatawpha county. Faulkner died On July 6, 1962 in a hospital only 45 miles from his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi.[40]

To understand Faulkner as a man and writer, one must understand his southerness. To a great extent, Faulkner loved Mississippi and the South. Malcolm Cowley, a close associate of Faulkner, wrote in 1945 that Faulkner "has a brooding love for the land where he was born and reared and where, unlike other writers of his generation, he has chosen to spend his life."[41] He loved the weather, the land itself, and

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[36] Hamblin, *Myself and the World*, 19.

[37] Ibid., 23.

[38] Ibid., 15, 23.

[39] Ibid., 28, 53, 54, 67.

[40] Ibid., 135.

[41] Malcolm Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, by William Faulkner, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), 19.

the "people created in the image of the land."[42] Many of his works center on themes of his "great love of the land and his regret over how it was being exploited and destroyed by modernization."[43] In his early life, he was a staunch defender of the South. Records show that he and one of his first mentors, Sherwood Anderson, would argue over the South; Anderson was critical of the South in general and most notably the region's race relations, which incited passionate defense from Faulkner, eventually contributing to a falling out between the two.[44]

As he grew older, however, Faulkner became more critical of his homeland; while he still loved it, his criticisms intensified. He became especially critical of racism in the South. He defended the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions to his fellow southerners and wrote a famous statement protesting the lynching of Emmett Till.[45] In 1954, he wrote an intensely critical essay about economic and race relations in the South.[46] Such writings made him increasingly unpopular in his home region. Nonetheless, Faulkner by no means completely escaped the racist ideas instilled in him during his childhood in the South. While he was progressive for a southerner at the time, he was still a gradualist in terms of civil rights, and (allegedly drunkenly) said that if there were another Civil War, he would again side with Mississippi and the South.[47] Scholar Lucy Buzacott argues that while Faulkner did have a deep and nuanced understanding of race relations in the South, including a progressive view that race was

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[42] Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, 19-20.

[43] Hamblin, Myself and the World, 72.

[44] Ibid., 39.

[45] Ibid., 111, 113-8.

[46] Lucy Buzacott, "History, Fiction, Autobiography: Faulkner's 'Mississippi,'" Life Writing, vol. 16, no. 4 (September 2019): 553, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14484528.2019.1633248.

[47] Hamblin, Myself and the World, 119-20.

a construct, his views should not be praised too highly because, like other southerners, his racial awakening was limited because it "present[s] racial knowledge as traumatic for white people, with little or no consideration of the very real trauma suffered by black men and women in the South."[48] This perhaps explains why Faulkner retained such a defensive stance towards the South despite developing more progressive ideas about race and racism over the course of his life.

Overall, Faulkner's sentiments can be summarized as a simultaneous like and dislike for Mississippi and the South. Cowley encapsulates this ambivalence in his introductory essay about Faulkner: "Here are the two sides of Faulkner's feeling for the South: on the one side, an admiring and possessive love; on the other, a compulsive fear lest what he loves should be destroyed by the ignorance of its native serfs and the greed of traders and absentee landlords."[49] In other words, Faulkner loved the South, but was critical of the ignorance of those who lived there, especially regarding their views on race relations, and on the modernization occurring there. In his essay "Mississippi" (1954), Faulkner summarized this ambivalence: "Loving all of it even while he had to hate some of it because he knows now that you don't love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults."[50]

Faulkner also had the privilege of traveling beyond Mississippi and the South, which gave him knowledge of the differences of life outside his home region. In 1921, he worked in New York and became acquainted with Northern writers and critics.[51] In

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[48] Buzacott, "History, Fiction, Autobiography: Faulkner's 'Mississippi,'" 558, 564.

[49] Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, 19.

[50] William Faulkner, "Mississippi" (October 1954; Project Gutenberg Canada, October 2014), https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/faulknerw-mississippi/faulknerw-mississippi-00-h.html.

[51] Hamblin, Myself and the World, 28.

1925, he spent time in New Orleans where he met Sherwood Anderson, a well-known author at the time, and developed connections with other literary figures of the time.[52] Later in 1925, after finishing his first novel *Soldier's Pay*, he spent a few months traveling around Europe.[53] Faulkner also spent two separate periods of his life in Hollywood, helping with the writing and production of Hollywood films.[54] These experiences broadened his worldview and allowed him to observe national and global phenomena that were not as perceived or relevant in the South. This travel may have enabled him to develop an understanding of women's rights issues outside of the South, and to evolve more progressive ideas of gender and race than were common in Mississippi.

At the time of Faulkner's writing, there was a debate over to what extent Faulkner's was a southern writer.[55] This topic is still debated among Faulkner scholars today.[56] The southern literary critic, poet, and novelist Robert Penn Warren wrote, in a review of the anthology *The Portable Faulkner*, that "Faulkner's work… is much more than 'a legend of the South': it dramatizes 'our general plight and problem.'"[57] Faulkner tended to agree with this assessment, claiming that although he wrote about the South because that is what he knew, his novels include themes that extend beyond the South.[58] Nonetheless, Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha county as a fictional representation of

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[52] Hamblin, Myself and the World, 32; Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, 8.
[53] Hamblin, Myself and the World, 35-7.
[54] Ibid., 63, 75.
[55] Ibid., 87.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 87-8.

Mississippi, where a majority of his stories take place.[59] He created this fictive South by carefully constructing this county and populating it with people from all economic and racial backgrounds, based on the people he knew from his homeland.[60] When reflecting on Yoknapatawpha county, Faulkner explained, "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it."[61]

Most scholars then and now view Faulkner as an essentially southern author. In 1925, Sherwood Anderson reportedly told Faulkner, "You're a country boy; all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from."[62] While not wholly accurate, Anderson's statement foreshadowed the prevalence of the reading of Faulkner as fundamentally a Southern author. Additionally, the poet and critic Malcolm Cowley, who was primarily responsible for the publication of *The Portable Faulkner*, wrote an introduction to the collection that argued that Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha Saga" (he coined this term) was a collection of stories that come together to form one story: the legend of the South.[63] Cowley's central argument is that Faulkner performed a "double labor" of "imagination" in his writing: "First, to invent a Mississippi County that was like a mythical kingdom, but was complete and living in all his details; second, to make his story of Yoknapatawpha County stand as a parable or legend of all the Deep South."[64] Cowley believed that all of the stories in this saga are pieces of a pattern that

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[59] Hamblin, Myself and the World, 43.
[60] Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, 6.
[61] Hamblin, *Myself and the World*, 44.
[62] Ibid., 32.
[63] Ibid., 81, 87.
[64] Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, 2.

together form an accurate and insightful look into life in Mississippi.[65] At the same time, this county is representative of all of the Deep South in this era, as the works explore themes of "moral confusion" and "social decay" that characterized the South in this period.[66] The works communicate both Faulkner's criticisms of the South and his home state, but also his deep love for it – it's people, land, and even weather.[67] Cowley concludes by arguing that "Essentially [Faulkner] is not a novelist," but an "epic or bardic poet in prose, a creator of myths that he weaves together into a legend of the South."[68] Cowley's essay represents the dominant view that Faulkner was a man deeply formed by his southern identity, and his works, specifically those in the Yoknapatawpha Saga, reflect that identity and experience and, in fact, are literary works that provide a sort of history of the Deep South.

My analysis of *As I Lay Dying* illustrates how in terms of his representation of women's reproductive rights and autonomy, Faulkner was both a distinctly southern writer, but also a writer who explored themes that extended beyond the South. His novel is in conversation with both national debates and ideas of women and their reproduction, like the constructions of the suffering mother and the promiscuous unmarried woman and the larger history of birth control and abortion in America, and with the unique experiences of sexuality and reproduction of poor, southern, white women like Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren. Thus, I take Cowley's concluding sentiments a step farther by agreeing that Faulkner's work is a version of history or

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[65] Cowley, introduction to The Portable Faulkner, 8.
[66] Ibid., 14.
[67] Ibid., 19-20.
[68] Ibid., 23.

legend of the South, but also arguing that it is a history of all American women's experiences with reproductive autonomy and rights in the early twentieth century. To understand how Faulkner does both, it is important to understand the living counterparts to the fictional Addie and Dewey Dell who Faulkner knew intimately because of his Southern identity and his life in Mississippi.

The History of Poor Southern White Womanhood

Faulkner constructed the female characters of *As I Lay Dying* based on what he experienced in the rural South. These women's identities intersected to create a lived experience that was vastly different than the lives of white women in the North and even middle-class and wealthy white women in the South. Until recently, historians have struggled to study these women; they mostly lived their lives in obscurity and left behind few documents like letters or journals, because they neither had the knowledge to read or write nor the money or time to spend on writing.[69] However, scholars have recently focused on uncovering the complexities of their circumstances and identities.

Poor southern white women found themselves in a bind between aspiring to the ideals of southern white womanhood and contributing to the economic stability of their families. Traditional gender roles remained deeply entrenched in the South longer than they did in the rest of the country, and this created a very rigid place for southern white women to fill. Thus, the primary goal of southern white women in this time was to

[69] Sally G. McMillen, Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017; ProQuest Ebook Central): 4.

marry and have children.[70] For poor women, this ideal was especially important because they needed the increased labor to help on the farm.[71] This need for labor is one of the main reasons why large families were more common in the South.[72] Gender roles also dictated that white women belonged in the house, with raising children as their number one priority.[73] This ideal of women as the "angels of the house" was upheld by racist and classist ideals that white women, as opposed to black women, should be able to stay inside and raise the kids, and not have to resort to fieldwork like white or black men and black women had to do.[74] In addition to the obvious sexist ideas undergirding these ideals, the entire system of gender roles was constructed around racist ideas stemming from the time of white enslavement of black people before the Civil War; southern patriarchy depended not only on the subordination of women but also on the subordination of Black people.[75] Given the history of race relations in the South, it was crucial for southern white women to distinguish themselves from Black women by focusing on their families and doing only domestic work.

However, this ideal was nearly impossible for working-class and poor southern white women. They were caught in a bind between the southern cultural ideal that defined their gender and whiteness primarily by the ability to stay in the house, and the

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[70] McMillen, Southern Women, 15; Margaret Jarman Hagood, Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1939): 121.

[71] McMillen, Southern Women, 69.

[72] Ibid., Hagood, Mothers of the South, 122.

[73] Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker, "'Pretty Near Every Woman Done a Man's Work:' Women and Field Work in Rural South," in Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century, ed. Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker (University of Missouri Press, 2006): 43-5.

[74] Ibid., 43.

[75] McMillen, Southern Women, 12.

economic imperative that less privileged women needed to work in the field with their men.[76] Some working-class and poor women tried to maintain this racial distinction and uphold the southern gender roles by farming and selling eggs and butter, activities that could contribute to the economic success of the family without crossing this color line.[77] However, most working-class and poor women ended up having to work in the fields despite the cultural pressures not to.[78] These conditions did not mean that they would fail to fulfill their gender's obligation to raise the family. Instead, these women did all of it; they raised the children, did all of the domestic labor in the house, and helped with the grueling field work.[79] And they did all of this without the modern appliances that women in the North or richer southern women had begun using, so even the domestic work was unimaginably difficult and taxing on the body.[80] Thus, many poor white southern women wrecked their bodies and strained their health trying to balance the imperatives of child rearing and fulfilling conventional gender roles, while also ensuring that their families could survive economically by working in the fields alongside their men.[81]

The experience of birthing and raising children was specific and unique for this group of women in the early twentieth century. Despite the economic and social

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[76] Sharpless and Walker, "Women and Field Work in the Rural South," 43.

[77] Ann E. McCleary, "'Seizing the Opportunity:' Home Demonstration Curb Markets in Virginia," in Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century, ed. Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker (University of Missouri Press, 2006): 99.

[78] Sharpless and Walker, "Women and Field Work in the Rural South," 42.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Lu Ann Jones, "'Work was my pleasure:' An Oral History of Nellie Stancil Langley," in Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century, ed. Rebecca Sharpless and Melissa Walker (University of Missouri Press, 2006): 18.

[81] Sharpless and Walker, "Women and Field Work in the Rural South," 48.

pressure to have large families, pregnancy was a time of fear and anxiety for these women.[82] Women would often go through a period of mourning when they found out they were pregnant because of the risks associated with childbirth, especially for impoverished women.[83] Such women would usually be able to send for a doctor when birthing their children, but any other health problems caused by the birth, like a dislocated uterus or a torn perinium, would often go untreated because they could not afford to send for the doctor again.[84] Even with the presence of doctors, birth for these women was very risky: in 1850, Southern women had twice the mortality rate as women in the North.[85] Every pregnancy was a risk. While such women often felt proud of their ability to give birth, because it allowed them to contribute to the economic success of their families, they frequently hoped that each child would be their last.[86]

What's more, pregnancy did not offer a break for these women from their work. They would work right up until the day they gave birth.[87] After giving birth, they might take at most a week off to recover.[88] Usually, however, it was less than this, because they often could not afford to pay for someone to cover their labor while they were recovering.[89] Reproductive labor only added to and exacerbated the effects of their other ceaseless labor around the house and in the fields.

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[82] McMillen, Southern Women, 74.
[83] Hagood, Mothers of the South, 122.
[84] Ibid., 116.
[85] McMillen, Southern Women, 78.
[86] Hagood, Mothers of the South, 121.
[87] Ibid., 110.
[88] Ibid., 112.
[89] Ibid.

Despite their desire to limit the number of their children, these women did not have access to birth control or abortions for many reasons specific to their poor southern white identities. According to Hagood's sample, a poor white southern woman in 1939 would have an average of 6.4 children.[90] However, such women repeatedly expressed their desire to have fewer. One of the interviewed women wished she had been able to have one child before getting married, so that she could have known what it was like and then decided not to get married at all.[91] Another woman expressed praise and jealously toward her wealthier white interviewer who only had one child.[92] Despite these desires, very few of these women used any contraceptives. Of the 69 mothers that Hagood interviewed, only eight of them used contraception, and two of them used the ineffective and unofficial form of withdrawal.[93] The majority supported the use of contraceptives but were unable to access birth control due to the many barriers that made contraceptive methods inaccessible to less privileged southern women.[94]

Perhaps the main reason these women did not use contraceptives was lack of knowledge about them.[95] Although birth control was a topic in many women's magazines in the 1930s, many poor women could neither afford them, nor read them. According to Hagood's studies, most of the women she interviewed knew that contraceptives existed but knew little more about what they were or how to access them.[96] These women lacked the correct terminology to talk about birth control, which

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[90] Hagood, Mothers of the South, 109.
[91] Ibid., 122.
[92] Ibid., 124.
[93] Ibid., 123.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 126.
[96] Ibid., 124.

made it difficult for them to seek information about it from doctors or their female friends.[97] Ironically, male doctors represented a barrier to contraceptives for these women. Doctors would tell women that they should not have any more children, but would not tell them how to achieve this, and women did not have the vocabulary or the courage to ask.[98]

Another significant factor was cost. Birth control was too expensive for poorer families, and there was a considerable risk that if they did spend the money on it, it could still fail, and they would get pregnant again anyway.[99] Women's subordination to their husbands was also a crucial factor. Men did not understand women's reproductive struggle firsthand, and therefore either did not want to change their routine to introduce birth control or spare the money to access it.[100] Also, men often supported the idea of having more children because of the labor contributions they would bring to the family.[101]

This inaccessibility of birth control was a significant factor that made the experiences of these poor southern white women so different from white women in the North or wealthier white women in the South. These other women could afford to go to doctors who had the knowledge and ability to provide birth control.[102] Even in the cases when birth control would fail, wealthy women could also access abortion, despite its illegal status, because their money and privilege allowed them to.[103] For poor southern

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[97] Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 123.
[98] Ibid., 125.
[99] Ibid., 126.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Elizabeth Cook, "Raising a Family," Ladies' Home Journal, October 1931, 23.
[103] Doan, "Shifting Contexts," 51.

white women, on the other hand, abortion remained taboo and largely inaccessible. While other white women were gaining control over their reproductive rights and autonomy, poor southern white women continued to destroy their bodies with the endless production of children, the ceaseless domestic labor it took to support their ever-growing families, and the fieldwork necessary to economically sustain these families. Their poverty and rural location in the South meant that they lived in a world far behind the rest of the United States, even the nearby wealthy towns. They were aware at some level of their plights as opposed to the lives of the townspeople and northerners, which often caused them to harbor resentment towards those that had easier lives than them.[104] While such poor southern women were proud of their ability to provide for their families and produce children to help with the economy and their family's success, at the same time their identities made it so that they lived unimaginably harsh and stressful lives consumed by endless, painful labor and dangerous childbirth.

[104] Hagood, Mothers of the South, 127.

Chapter 2: A Close Reading of the Novel Through the Lens of these Histories

These histories of the birth control and abortion movement, the construction of the dichotomy of the struggling mother and the promiscuous unmarried woman, Faulkner's identity as a southern author, and the unique experiences of poor southern white women contextualize *As I Lay Dying* to reveal how the novel can be read as a national and distinctly southern history of women's reproductive rights and autonomy. A cross-contextualization of the articles, letters, and the resulting stereotyped images of the two antithetical women desiring birth control and *As I Lay Dying* reveals that the characters of Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren each represent one of these versions of women. Addie represents the suffering, respectable mother whose body and finances are significantly affected by carrying and birthing children, while Dewey Dell represents the woman who engages in sex outside of marriage and does not want to have to face pregnancy and motherhood as the result. An analysis of how Faulkner constructs these characters along the lines of the two opposing stereotypes begins to reveal how *As I Lay Dying* reflects the prominent ideas of women's reproductive rights at its time of publication, but also disrupts these stereotypes in order to make novel contributions to the debate. Additionally, Faulkner's representations of the two characters as poor southern white women reveal how he contributes to the national debate by showing the unique ways that the struggle for reproductive autonomy affected these women whose voices were not heard in the larger national context. He progressively champions these women by bringing his northern audience's attention to their intersectional struggle and by giving them the words they did not have to voice their feelings on the issue of reproductive rights and autonomy. In doing this, he also

contributes to the historical understanding of these poor southern white women by creating individual, subjective representations of the women with their own motivations, fears, and desires to study and understand rather than presenting an overgeneralized monolith of these women.

Addie as the Poor, Southern, Suffering Mother

Other characters and Addie's own narration characterize her along the lines of the stereotype of the mother suffering because of her labor and her production of children. Faulkner additionally complicates this construction by also characterizing her as a poor southern white mother whose labor and reproduction are even more deadly, and who does not have birth control as an option to end her suffering. Thus, he creates a specific and unique construction of the poor, southern, suffering mother whose lack of control over her reproduction leads to her death, which brings attention to the struggle of this specific type of woman he would have been familiar with living in the South, but whose struggle northern birth control advocates ignored. He also progressively takes this complication further by subverting Addie's outward presentation as a suffering mother with her admission of her lack of pride in childbirth and her extramarital affair, which implicates the southern norms that attempt to convince women that this endless reproduction is prideful, and elevates Addie as a moral center of the novel by showing that despite her lack of autonomy as a poor southern woman, she was able to creatively find ways to exercise her autonomy in defiance of her oppression.

Faulkner uses other characters' narrative descriptions and observations of Addie in order to construct her along the lines of the respectful, suffering southern mother. Addie's husband Anse, for example, characterizes her as a mother who wanted to raise

her children right: "But couldn't no woman strove harder than Addie to make them right, man and boy: I'll say that for her."[1] His description characterizes her as a respectful mother similarly to how the women in the letters construct themselves by including their love for their children and their desire to raise them right. Other characters, including Cora Tull, also describe Addie in a way that characterizes her as suffering, and as having suffered for a long time: "The quilt is drawn up to her chin, as hot as it is, with only her two hands raised so she can see out the window… Her face is wasted away so that the bones draw just under the skin in white lines. Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks."[2] Cora describes Addie as she lays dying in bed watching Cash build her coffin. The imagery of her visible bones and her sunken eyes render her as wasted and suffering, due to a lifetime of hard work and not being able to eat enough, which lying on her deathbed exacerbates. Cora's description portrays Addie as having physically and financially struggled in her life, like the ways the women in the letters emphasize their lack of money and their suffering bodies.

In Addie's chapter, Faulkner continues to construct her like the real suffering mothers, suffering as a direct result of lacking control over her own reproduction. When Addie gives birth to Darl, she begins to show the same feelings as the real woman searching for birth control at the time: "At first I would not believe it. Then I believed that I would kill Anse. It was as though he had tricked me… I knew then that my father

[1] William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying: The Norton Critical Edition, ed. Michael Gorra (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 23.

[2] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 6.

had been right…"[3] Addie's anger and shock come from the lack of control she had over her reproductive autonomy; she feels shocked and betrayed by Anse when she has Darl, because she was not trying to or wanting to have another child after her first child, Cash. This sentiment is similar to the women who do love their children but want to be able to control how many they have. When she says her father was right, she means that he was right in saying that "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time."[4] She realizes her father is right after having Darl because she now understands that the endless and exhausting amount of work she will have to put into raising an ever-growing family will tire her out enough to be ready to die, but also because she must live a life in which she has no control over her reproduction. In this Addie resembles the women writing the letters to *Birth Control Review*, especially the young woman who cries as she thinks of her life being consumed by the uncontrollable reproduction of more and more children. Darl's birth symbolizes this same emotional realization for Addie, as she comes to understand that as long as she and Anse have sex, she will not be able to control the number of children she has.

The title of the novel, *As I Lay Dying,* evokes an image remarkably similar to how the real suffering mothers in this time described being overworked and having more children than they could handle. Specifically, the title of the novel resembles the mother evoked in *Birth Control Review* who did not want to produce children "until [she is] too worn out to live or die." This mother saw birth control as the solution to the problem of these women suffering to death because of their inability to stop their

[3] Ibid., 99-100.

[4] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 98.

reproductive labor. However, Addie, despite her construction as one of these women, does not express any knowledge of birth control. This is because, in contrast to the women writing to the magazine, Addie is a poor southern woman. Faulkner complicates Addie's characterization as the suffering mother who deserves birth control with her identity as a poor southern white mother to highlight how these women were most in need of birth control, yet also the ones with the least access to or knowledge of it. Because of her identity, Addie not only lives the life that this woman wanted to avoid with birth control, but a grueling life unimaginable to these women who lived in the North. The title of the novel takes on greater meaning when considering the historical reality of poor white southern women who, as the historical context illuminates, were actually worked to death by the specific taxing and deadly qualities of their reproductive, domestic, and field labor. Addie is a reflection of this, as her chapter and the observations of other characters reveal that she lays dying because of this labor specific to poor southern women.

Faulkner constructs Addie as a southern woman aware of her responsibility to produce children to contribute to the economic success of her family, which contributes to her being worked to death. In her chapter, she suggests she is dying because she has finished her reproductive labor: "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine. And then I could get ready to die."[5] She says she is ready to die after she has given birth to all her children and done her duty of giving Anse his children. Three of Addie's children are Anse's and not hers because she knows

[5] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 102.

at the same time she is producing children, she is producing commodities, like herself, that Anse will exploit in the field and in the house for the limited economic means the family maintains. Faulkner, because of his southern identity, was aware of how reproduction and labor were inextricably linked in southern culture, and how this led to a demand for women to reproduce as many children as possible, with little consideration for the physical or mental wellbeing of the woman. With Addie, he exposes that the implications of this inequity are the women being forced to reproduce to death, which is both a critique of the southern society and economics that demand this of women, and of the northern birth control advocates who withheld access to birth control from these women, which would give them the power to free themselves from the obligation of reproducing labor for their families until they are too tired to survive.

In addition to being worked to death by her reproductive labor devoid of feelings of pride, Addie has been worked to death providing other physical labor for her family in a way that only poor southern women were forced to do because of their poverty. Multiple times, characters observe how Anse does not sweat because of his belief that he cannot sweat after getting sick from working too hard in his youth: "he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it."[6] This belief of Anse implies that rather than doing any work himself and, in his mind, risking death, he makes his family, including Addie, do all the work. This assertion is darkly ironic, as doing Anse's work actually does lead to the death of Addie. The historical accounts of poor southern white women sometimes having to take up field work alongside domestic work and reproductive work confirm that Anse's refusal to work would have ensured

[6] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 11.

that Addie was being worked to death not only in the house, but also doing the field labor that Anse, as the man in the house, was supposed to do. Because gender roles at the time usually limited women's labor to domestic labor, implicit in the construction of the struggling mother is the assumption that they are being overworked by domestic labor. Addie then represents an intersectional and regionally specific construction of this struggling mother because her economic and regional identity and her husband's refusal to work mean that she is overworked both in the home and in the field, in a way that would have been unimaginable for northern readers or even more wealthy southern readers.

Vernon Tull's narration reinforces the reality of this deadly labor for struggling southern mothers. The similarities between the story of Tull's mother and Addie also reveal the normalcy of this fate for poor southern white women:

> "It's a hard life on women, for a fact… I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. 'You all will have to look out for pa the best you can," she said. 'I'm tired.'"[7]

Tull generalizes that women, like his mother and Addie, are worked to the point where they just lie down and die one day. This narration from Tull is significant because it shows that Addie is not the only woman in the world of the novel who is worked to death. Thus Faulkner's novel highlights that this was not just the reality for Addie. Many southern mothers were forced to reproduce and work until they decide it is time

[7] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 18.

to lay down and die, which the historical contexts reveals was the reality for many poor southern women. Again, Faulkner's innovative style allows him to make this progressive claim. The use of multiple narrators enables Faulkner to write a chapter from the point of Tull, who is not a member of the Bundren family but a neighbor, which allows for him to express experiences not directly related to the plot of the Bundrens, like this explanation of the life of Tull's mother, that contributes to the novel's representation of southern mothers being exploited and worked to death.

Despite the deadly physical and mental effects of this endless childbirth and labor, the historical context, specifically Hagood's interviews, highlight that these southern women still saw childbirth as a source of pride. Faulkner, however, subverts this expectation by showing how after death, Addie describes her reproductive labor not as prideful, but as empty and disappointing. In her chapter, Addie thinks: "The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a and I couldn't think *Anse*, I couldn't remember *Anse*."[8] Faulkner inserts this blank space into the narrative to represent the void that Addie feels is her body after childbirth. This blank space juxtaposes the alleged fulfillment that southern society tells women they will feel when they have children with the true emptiness that results from unceasing reproductive labor. These women are supposed to feel proud of their reproductive capabilities and their ability to contribute to the economics of their family; society would tell Addie she should see her body in the shape of a "mother" or a "woman," but instead she sees it as nothing. This nothingness also arguably manifests her awareness of how her body is void of description or humanity, as a thing meant only to reproduce children for her

[8] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 100.

husband and family. Faulkner's use of the space in the text, one of his innovative modernist formal features, allows for constructive ambiguity. It encapsulates the complexity of Addie's feelings towards motherhood that she could not vocalize during her life, complicating the assertion that all southern women were proud of their motherhood. It also prompts the reader think about the meaning of the space or fill in their own word for what she feels like, which encourages identification and sympathy with Addie as a poor southern white woman. Faulkner's innovative stream-of-consciousness style enables him to give voice to the secret feelings of poor southern women like Addie -- and Dewey Dell -- despite their apparent embrace of and obedience to the conventional imperatives of motherhood, childbirth, and child rearing. Through Addie he speaks the truths of the condition of suffering southern mothers that he perhaps felt these women could not say in life, or that were unrecognizable to them until they could reflect on their lives after death, which is something only a character in a modernist novel would be able to do. By using this style, he subverts the expectation that all southern women were prideful of their reproduction. Faulkner exposing the falsity of this pride is again important in implicating the role of southern culture and society in promoting this feeling of pride as a way to continue forcing women to endlessly reproduce, and the northern birth control activists who ignored the needs of these women perhaps partially because of this outward projection of pride made them easier to ignore.

These passages that highlight the deadly reproduction and labor of Addie specific to her southern identity reveal that Faulkner not only constructs Addie along the lines of the suffering mother, but also complicates this portrayal with the addition of

the experiences of being poor and southern (the constructed suffering mother was already white) to show how the struggles of this type of woman were exacerbated and differed depending on regionality and class. By complicating the struggling mother type in these ways, Faulkner makes his portrayal less stereotypical, generalized, and therefore more humanizing and convincing. This more complex rendering also allows for an implicit criticism of the social and economic forces that shape and constrain poor southern women looking for birth control, like poverty and the patriarchy, and of the northern advocates and media who constructed images like the struggling mother without a consideration of the specific unique experiences of struggling southern mothers, who in many ways had it much worse.

In addition to Faulkner characterizing Addie as a poor, rural, southern version of the respectable, suffering mother, he also subverts the stereotype of the struggling mother by including Addie's affair with Whitfield that results in the birth of Jewel. In her chapter, Addie describes her affair with Whitfield: "While I waited for him in the woods, waiting for him before he saw me, I would think of him as dressed in sin. I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged for sin was sanctified."[9] Despite her general identity as a respectable mother, Addie seeks out "sin" in the form of sex outside of wedlock, which breaks the stereotype of the suffering woman in need of birth control and complicates it with the actions usually characteristic of the mutually exclusive unmarried, sexually promiscuous woman. She imagines the "sin" as she waits for him because she knows what she is doing is sinful, but this sinfulness is also what makes the

[9] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 101.

affair most attractive to her. She also finds his sin more exciting because he is "sanctified," which refers to his identity as a minister. This is ironic, because institutionalized religion was one of the main factors that constructed and perpetuated the stereotypes of the two opposing women in regard to the birth control movement. Addie successfully subverts and complicates this distinction by having sex with a character who represents the church. Faulkner further subverts the stereotype of suffering woman seeking birth control, as Addie not only has sex out of her marriage, but also shows no desire to prevent the natural consequences of this "sinful" act, and instead wants to have Jewel as a representation of her "revenge" against Anse for violating her reproductive autonomy. She thinks of Jewel, like Cash, as another child that is hers, and not Anse's. Jewel is a child that she wanted to have, and therefore represents her reproductive freedom.

Faulkner includes this affair not only to destabilize the stereotype of the respectable, suffering woman Addie represents, but also to give her some ability to exercise her reproductive freedom and autonomy, despite her lack of knowledge about birth control. The historical contexts reveal that poor southern white women lacked autonomy in basically every aspect of their lives. They were forced to work in the home because of the patriarchy, forced to work in the fields to ensure their family's economic success, and forced to reproduce children to be workers for the family. They had little ability to pursue an education, and because of this lack of education, they were not able to articulate fully their own ideas and thoughts. All of this might lead to their early deaths, as with Addie. In short, their identities as poor, rural, southern, women in the patriarchy of the Deep South largely deprived them of their autonomy and right to life.

Through Addie's character, Faulkner criticizes the limited autonomy southern society permitted these women by giving Addie agency in several ways, one of which is her affair with Whitfield. She controls her sexuality and reproduction not through access to birth control, but through having sex with someone she desires for her own enjoyment and to produce a child that is not connected or indebted to labor for Anse, the man who symbolizes her oppression. This infusion of Addie with a subversive agency constitutes a rejection of, or at least a resistance to, the patriarchy and southern morality, which is progressive coming from Faulkner, a man who was very much a product and benefactor of the southern patriarchy. The other way Addie exercises autonomy is through her request to make Anse and her children transport her body to be buried in Jefferson. This journey is extremely taxing and laborious, as Addie knew it would be. Thus, she also exercises autonomy in the novel by forcing her family, and especially Anse who amplified her oppression by refusing to work, to experience a fraction of the difficult labor she gave to them in her life. Now her children, whom she had to labor for Anse, must labor for her. Because of the forces restricted her autonomy, though, this act of defiance is still restricted because it takes place after her death. These two limited but impactful manifestations of Addie's autonomy highlight how limited opportunities for autonomy for poor southern white women were in the 1930s. However, these expressions of autonomy also confirm that Faulkner does not construct such women as passive victims; instead, he highlights how they found spaces for autonomy and resistance even in their unimaginably constrained and oppressive lives.

Faulkner's representation of Addie, and more specifically his representation of her resistance, contributes to the progressive and historical nature of *As I Lay Dying*.

Faulkner does not recreate a stereotype of either the sympathetic, suffering mother, nor the oppressed poor southern white woman. Instead, he combines the two in his construction of Addie and gives her the words and space to voice her experiences reflectively after her death – experiences that normally died with such women. Faulkner constructes Addie in part to respond to the national historical forces of the movement for women's reproductive rights and the economically, racially, and regionally specific historical realities of poor southern white women, allowing readers to understand these historical experiences more intimately and humanly. In writing of her resistance, Faulkner positions her as a moral center of the novel, despite what many would call her immoral act of infidelity: she is able to exercise autonomy in a society built to limit or deprive women like her of independent agency. I read Addie as the embodiment and representation of Faulkner's opposition to the ignorance and patriarchy of a region and nation that ignores and exacerbates the struggles and oppressions of women, and especially poor southern women.

Dewey Dell as the Promiscuous Unmarried Woman, or, the Poor Ignorant Southern Victim Without Words

Through Dewey Dell's chapters and her interactions with other characters, Faulkner characterizes her as a version of the "promiscuous," unmarried woman who has internalized the stereotype and its stigma, searching for an abortion because of her sex out of wedlock. However, he complicates this stereotype by portraying her as a victim of both Lafe and MacGowan, the drug store employee, which progressively challenges this media construction by showing that not only married women are deserving of control over their reproductive rights. Like Addie, he also creates Dewey

Dell as a regionally and class specific version of this construction, as Dewey Dell's poor white southern womanhood makes it increasingly hard for her to navigate the process of accessing her abortion because she does not have the education nor language to communicate the help she needs. Finally, Faulkner complicates Dewey Dell's outward presentation of ignorance with her inward intelligence and awareness of her situation, which illuminates how Dewey Dell is not only a victim of sexual assault, but of the society who renders her without opportunity for education or growth. Through Dewey Dell, Faulkner criticizes the condition of the South that renders women like Dewey Dell without these options, and positions her too as a moral center, as she still exercises autonomy through her moral subjectivity, or awareness of her own situation, despite the societal forces that attempt to render her with even less agency than her mother.

Faulkner constructs Dewey Dell as the other type of woman whom birth control opponents and advocates feared would abuse increased access to birth control: the promiscuous unmarried woman who wants to prevent pregnancy and childbirth resulting from sex outside of marriage. Dewey Dell describes her first-time having sex with her boyfriend Lafe:

> We picked on down the row, the woods getting closer and closer and the secret shade, picking on into the secret shade with my sack and Lafe's sack. Because I said will I or wont I when the sack was half full because I said if the sack is full when we get to the woods it wont be me. I said if it dont mean for me to do it the sack will not be full and I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help it. It will be that I had to do it all the time and I cannot help it. And we picked on toward the secret shade and our eyes would drown together touching on his hands and my hands and I didn't say anything. I said 'What are you doing?' and he said

> 'I am picking into your sack.' And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could not help it.[10]

In this passage, Dewey Dell shows that she knows that she should not have sex with Lafe. She repeatedly refers to the place where they have sex as the "secret shade," and also refers to sex as "it" rather than calling it what it is. This omission illustrates that she knows that it is not seen as morally or societally acceptable to have sex without being married, as she attributes vague diction to the act, to conceal the unacceptability of what she is doing not only from others, but also from herself. She characterizes herself as one of the promiscuous women having sex outside as marriage and has also internalized the shame that society puts on these women. Importantly, her agency or lack thereof is ambiguous in the passage. She seems to want to have sex with Lafe to some extent but creates this system of only doing it if her sack is full by the end of the row, so that she does not have to accept full responsibility for her actions. However, at the same time, any agency she does have is taken away from her when Lafe begins to pick into her sack, ensuring that she has no choice, and "could not help it." Her diminished agency is significant, because it shows that Faulkner complicates the stereotype of the woman having sex out of wedlock with the possibility of Dewey Dell not having fully consented to this act. This lack of agency also connects Dewey Dell to her mother and other poor southern white women who also lack agency regarding reproduction and other areas of life. Rather than constructing Dewey Dell as a stereotypical irresponsible, promiscuous woman, Faulkner complicates this image that the birth control movement constructs by emphasizing women's comparative lack of agency, especially poor

[10] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 17.

southern white women. This lack of agency renders Dewey Dell a victim rather than the immoral woman birth control advocates and the church wanted to demonize; however, because of her internalized shame, she is not able to see the full reality of her victimhood, or perhaps she does not think others would see her as the victim she is, which results in many barriers in the process of getting the help she needs.

Dewey Dell's fear of her pregnancy being exposed and her shame and hesitation to ask for help also characterizes her as one of these women who would use birth control outside of marriage who has internalized society's shaming. Dewey Dell repeatedly expresses hatred and violent desires toward Darl because he is the only one, besides Lafe, who knows she is pregnant. When they are riding on the wagon, she fantasizes about killing Darl: "I rose and took the knife from the streaming fish still hissing and I killed Darl."[11] Similarly, when the officials come to take Darl away, Cash describes Dewey Dell's reaction: "...it was Dewey Dell that was on him before even Jewel could get at him. And then I believe I knowed how Gillespie knowed how his barn taken fire."[12] Dewey Dell not only imagines violence against Darl but acts on it when she gets the appropriate opportunity - she both attacks him and is the one responsible for his being institutionalized. Her primary reason for disliking Darl is because somehow, he knows she is pregnant. To her, he represents a violation of her privacy and the constant threat of being exposed to the rest of her family. She fears this exposure so much because she has internalized the shame that society puts onto women like her who have sex outside of marriage.

[11] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 69.
[12] Ibid., 137.

Similarly, this internalized shame manifests in fear about asking for help to abort her baby. When Peabody, the doctor from the town, comes to tend to Addie, Dewey Dell looks at him, and thinks, "He could do so much for me, if he just would. He could do everything for me," meaning he could help her abort her baby, but she never asks him.[13] Like the unmarried women who wrote to *Birth Control Review* Dewey Dell does not feel like she can ask for information on reproductive topics, because doctors, activists, and society as a whole made it known that birth control was not meant to be used to help women like her. Moreover, because Peabody is the Bundrens' family doctor, if Dewey Dell were to reveal her condition his vision of her would be tainted, and he would likely tell her family. Faulkner characterizes Dewey Dell as fearful of both Darl and asking Peabody for help. She appears a fictional version of the real women impregnated after wedlock, too ashamed and scared to seek help regarding their reproduction.

Dewey Dell also symbolizes the duality of the suffering mother and the promiscuous, sexually active woman when she arrives in town, as she attempts to reconstruct herself as the respectful mother whom others would deem worthy of giving information to. Going to town presents a great possibility to Dewey Dell because no one there knows her; therefore, she can represent herself in a way that allows her the greatest possibility of success in obtaining an abortion. She fails to get any information at her first stop where the pharmacist tells her instead to get a marriage license.[14] The pharmacist's reaction reinforces the belief that only married women deserved access to

[13] Ibid., 35.

[14] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 116.

information about birth control, mirroring the ideas of the world Faulkner lived and wrote in. Learning from this encounter, she dons her Sunday clothing to perform the role of a respectable, suffering mother: "Dewey Dell returns. We watch her emerge from the bushes, carrying the package, and climb into the wagon. She now wears her Sunday dress, her beads, her shoes, and stockings."[15] In her nicest clothes, Dewey Dell will appear more respectable, older, and perhaps even married. The Sunday clothes also cover the poverty and rural identity that even wealthier southerners in bigger towns did not understand or respect. She attempts to communicate these things visually, in the same way that the women writing to *Birth Control Review* tried to do through their writing. Dewey Dell's refashioning of her appearance confirms that she knows her perceived identity as an unmarried, promiscuous, irresponsible woman will limit her ability to access the help she seeks. Appearing more like a respectable mother, she is more likely to successfully get information about and access to an abortion.

Once she enters the store and is speaking with MacGowan, the pharmacy clerk, he questions her to discover her actual identity: "'You ain't married are you?' I says. I never saw no ring. But like as not, they aint heard yet out there that they use rings."[16] MacGowan too seems to subscribe to the idea that only married women deserve access to the information she is asking for. Dewey Dell evades the question, knowing that she cannot say no. Despite her attempted visual construction of herself as a married woman, Dewey Dell's way of speaking, her age, and her lack of a wedding ring communicate to MacGowan that she is an unmarried pregnant woman. Given that MacGowan is likely

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[15] Ibid., 132.

[16] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 140.

familiar with the two constructed images of the respectable, suffering mother and the irresponsible, promiscuous, sexually active unmarried woman, he stereotypes Dewey Dell into this latter category, despite her apparel. This sexist perception likely encourages him to give Dewey Dell false abortifacients, and to rape her when she returns that night for her "treatment."[17] MacGowan's rape of Dewey Dell highlights that the construction of the promiscuous unmarried woman is harmful and inaccurate; it leads to Dewey Dell, who was already a victim of Lafe, to be taken advantage of because of the widespread result of the belief that no unmarried woman looking for birth control was innocent or deserving of it.

Dewey Dell's failure to get an abortion, and her inability to communicate to Lafe about her consent or Peabody and the employees in town about her desire for an abortion can also be attributed to her identity as a young poor southern white woman. The historical sources about such women reveal that they had limited, if any, knowledge about birth control, reproduction, and abortions. Besides their isolation from towns, the key reason for this lack of knowledge was because they did not have the words to ask the necessary questions that would give them access to information about the subject. Poor southern families did bring doctors to aid in childbirth and give advice and treatment for certain medical issues. Nonetheless, like Dewey Dell, many poor southern women had not learned the words to ask about their reproduction. It was not only Dewey Dell's shame that keeps her from asking Peabody for help, but also her ignorance of the correct words in which to ask. Even when she later asks MacGowan for help, whom she mistakenly thinks is a doctor and intends to pay for an abortion, she

[17] Ibid., 143.

uses unclear wording "female trouble," to ask.[18] Such limitations of knowledge and language contributed to her getting impregnated as well; she did not have the words necessary to express her concerns and reservations to Lafe. Dewey Dell's pregnancy, her failed attempt to get an abortion, and her rape at the hands of MacGowan result in large part from her identity as a poor white rural southern girl with neither the words to express her sexual autonomy to Lafe nor to search for the reproductive healthcare she needs. Faulkner deconstructs the stereotype of the promiscuous unmarried woman by portraying Dewey Dell as a victim of both that stereotype and of her situation as a poor white southern woman.

In other areas of the text, however, Faulkner represents Dewey Dell as a profound, intelligent thinker which contrasts with her inability to articulate her need for reproductive help. This complicating evidence reinforces my contention that Faulkner does not portray Dewey Dell as at fault, but rather attributes that fault to the patriarchal and inequitable society that renders her uneducated and victimized. In one of her chapters, Dewey Dell describes her condition: "I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth."[19] In this moment, unlike other moments where Dewey Dell struggles with her words and expresses herself using a limited southern dialect, she thinks profoundly and poetically about her situation, in a Faulknerian style usually only reserved for Darl. It is a shift in style even from the previous sentence written in short abrupt syntax with improper grammar and punctuation: "I dont know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not. I dont know whether I can cry or not. I dont know whether I have

[18] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 140.

[19] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 38.

tried to or not."[20] These sentences, and a majority of the others in her chapters, characterize her as scrambled and uneducated. The following sentence, however, reveals that while she is uneducated, she is not unintelligent. A close reading of this sentence illuminates that Dewey Dell is aware of the situation society puts her in and maintains autonomy through her moral subjectivity, which works progressively as a critique of the societal forces that see her as only an object for reproduction and that doom her to live the same laborious life without autonomy as her mother. Faulkner talks through Dewey Dell to criticize these forces and show how lack of access to birth control, the patriarchy, and the economy of the South rob women like Dewey Dell of their creative potential.

The imagery of Dewey Dell as a "wet seed" falsely foreshadows Dewey Dell as a young woman who will grow to achieve greatness. A seed has connotations of birth, growth, and life, her description of herself as a seed might be interpreted as referring to the fact that she's pregnant. However, Dewey Dell's words suggest that she herself is the seed, still young and not yet grown into her full potential as an adult. This interpretation is supported by the fact that her name is Dewey Dell, and the seed is described as "wet," a synonym for Dewey. A "Dell" usually refers to a fertile valley, which is connected to the fertile seed. In this reading, her name is essentially a synonym for the "wet seed" she refers to. The "wet seed" also represents a self-consciousness recognition of her own name. Thus, while she may have been so named because of women's reproductive role, her name can also be read in her own terms as an acknowledgment of the potential she could have.

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[20] Ibid.

Such a positive reading is problematized, however, because Dewey Dell locates the "wet seed" in the "hot blind earth" calling into question her potential for success and foreshadowing the possibility that she will meet a fate similar to Addie's. Dewey Dell's wetness contrasted by the earth's hotness symbolizes how the heat of the earth will dry up the wetness of the seed, rendering it unable to thrive. In another environment, she may have had this potential to grow, but the hot earth - a symbol for the hot Mississippian land she lives on – dries up this potential because of the patriarchy and poverty that living in the rural South imposes on her.

The imagery of Dewey Dell as a seed buried in the earth continues to reinforce both her youth and potential for growth and the inescapable repetition of the life of her mother by illustrating that women are doomed to this fate before they are even born. The image of Dewey Dell as a seed in the earth mirrors the image of the baby inside of her. The imagery figures Dewey Dell as a kind of fetus in the ground, the "hot earth" acting as a womb. This representation of her as embryonic, yet to be born, not only characterizes her as innocent and naive, but also emphasizes the tragedy that someone so young and uneducated, still only a child herself, is already pregnant with her own child. The inhospitable environment of the "hot blind earth" suggests that while she still needs time to grow and thrive, Dewey Dell will be unable to because of the unfitness of that environment. This imagery is ironic, as a womb is normally the ideal environment for nurturing and development, but Dewey Dell's environment is blinkered and hostile. This paradox of an unfit womb symbolizes the fact that even before birth Dewey Dell was meant to reach this tragic fate as a woman. Her simile also places her underground in the earth, ironically in the same place where her dead mother will eventually go.

Dewey Dell's poetic comparison to "a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth" ultimately implies the idea that poor southern women are doomed to lives of working to death from before birth.

She describes the earth as not only "hot" but "blind." She characterizes the earth as "blind" in part because people like Peabody would be able to help her if they were not blind to her problems. More important, by attributing the word "blind" to the earth, she emphasizes her radical isolation, as if the entire earth and everyone on it were blind to her struggles and the realities of her life as a poor southern woman that represses her potential. But being upfront and honest about her pregnancy, which might rid the world of its blindness toward her is impossible for Dewey Dell both because of the stigma surrounding unmarried pregnant women like her, and because she lacks the education, self-possession, and language to articulate her predicament and her need for help. She is aware in a way that should not be possible of the wide-reaching blindness that the world turns toward her, and women like her. Faulkner's modernist style allows him to construct her as impossibly aware of her own situation and location in the national context, which enables him to make claims that extent beyond her immediate situation to implicate broader societal forces inherently at play, such as these blind northern advocates who deem Dewey Dell undeserving of the birth control that could pacify her struggle and liberate her potential.

Dewey Dell also attributes the word "wild" to herself as a seed, further emphasizing the exploitation of women for their reproductive labor, like animals, in the rural South. "Wild" has connotations of without restraint and is an adjective often attributed to animals or plants; her use of it to describe herself establishes the

association she sees between animals and women. Immediately before she describes herself as "a wet seed wild," she is in the barn with the cow, an animal, and says to her: "'You'll just have to wait. What you got in you ain't nothing to what I got in me, even if you are a woman too.' She follows me, moaning."[21] In this passage, Dewey Dell tells the cow that she must wait to be milked, and the milk in her is nothing compared to the baby inside Dewey Dell. By referring to the cow as "a woman" and by comparing the things inside both of them, Dewey Dell equates herself with the cow. The cow is described as "moaning," over the discomfort she feels from the milk inside her that needs to be let out, once again implying the suffering of women and the similarity between Dewey Dell and the cow. By referring to herself as "wild," and by communicating with and comparing herself to the cow, Dewey Dell suggests the comparable exploitation of female animals and human women for reproductive purposes and labor.

In her striking self-descriptive simile, Dewey Dell identifies the various levels of repression she is subject to as a poor unmarried white woman in Depression era rural Mississippi. Her description illustrates the tragic reality she and other women face, including a generationally inheritable condition of repression characterized by suppressed potential, the blindness of those who could help, and reproductive exploitation. Moreover, Dewey Dell's poetic sentence confirms that she is not unintelligent, but a profound and intuitive thinker, like Darl or Faulkner himself. In this sentence, Faulkner mourns Dewey Dell's human potential that is crushed by her identity as a poor southern white woman for whom the education, nurturing, and love that might

[21] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 37.

release that potential is not possible. Faulkner's portrayal confirms that it is not only Dewey Dell's inability to access an abortion that hinders her success, but also the lack of education that would have empowered her to seek birth control to prevent pregnancy, and, if she still did get pregnant, would have enabled her to effectively communicate her need for support and an abortion. Faulkner's characterization of her as intelligent also highlights and grieves the fact that if it were not for poverty and the patriarchy dooming her to a life of childbearing and work, she might have lived a fulfilling life, perhaps as an intellectual or writer, like Faulkner.

The character of Dewey Dell reveals how Faulkner uses his innovative modernist style to construct the progressive representations of women's reproductive rights and autonomy in his novel. Faulkner's use of multiple narrators enables Dewey Dell's intelligence to be seen. If another character had narrated the entire novel we would understand Dewey Dell mainly through her spoken dialogue, which is usually fragmented and unclear. By allowing Dewey Dell to narrate her own chapters in the stream-of-consciousness style, Faulkner enables the reader to understand the profoundness of Dewey Dell's thoughts that she cannot translate into spoken words because of her lack of education. Additionally, Faulkner's highly descriptive and symbolic language and style allows for an abundance of meaning to be extrapolated from Dewey Dell's poetic moments; in the single sentence, as we've seen, Faulkner both criticizes the society that put Dewey Dell in her tragic situation and shows that she has an intuitive and insightful understanding of her position and oppression as well. Furthermore, because Faulkner uses such a distinct style, readers can easily notice when a character begins to shift into thinking or speaking in a style that mirrors the author's.

By recognizing this, readers can realize when Faulkner speaks through the characters. Dewey Dell's profound sentence is one of these moments: as Faulkner speaks through Dewey Dell, he gives her the words and eloquence to voice the struggles and realities she faces, which most women like her lacked.

As he does with his portrayal of Addie, Faulkner complicates the construction of the promiscuous unmarried woman and the stereotype of the uneducated poor southern white women through his portrayal of Dewey Dell. He characterizes her as a victim of the intersecting forces that oppress her in the world she lives in: she is a victim of rape, poverty, lack of access to education, the patriarchy, and even the leaders of the birth control movement like Margaret Sanger who made choices that restricted poor rural women, and those they generalized as immoral and undeserving, from accessing birth control or abortion. However, Faulkner constructs Dewey Dell, like Addie, as having some space and agency for resistance, although it is even more constrained for her than for Addie. Despite all the limitations she faces, Dewey Dell maintains a level of moral subjectivity – her ability to recognize the societal forces at play in her life that stifle her potential, leaving her oppressed and violated. Her ability to recognize those forces positions her, like her mother, as a moral center of the novel, representing both a victim deserving of reproductive control despite her unmarried status, and a woman who resists her oppression and maintains some level of her humanity through her moral subjectivity.

Chapter 3: Book Reviews

In contrast to Faulkner's previously released novels, *As I Lay Dying* was not initially received well by either Northern or Southern reviewers. These reviews misinterpret or flatten the nuances of the novel and its themes, particularly those surrounding women. These repeated misinterpretations highlight the inability for those outside the context of the South to understand the lives of those like the Bundrens at the time and illuminate the progressive nature of the novel in its unapologetic depiction of abject poverty in the South and women's reproductive autonomy.

Most reviews from the early 1930s do not address themes of gender of sexuality in the novel; however, those few reviews that address those themes make clear through their limitations and misreadings how progressive Faulkner's outlook on women's reproductive autonomy was for the time, even in the context of the North. In a review in *The Bookman*, a northern literary journal, one reviewer wrote that, "sexual irregularity furnishes either the major or minor theme," of the novel, and that in the novel, Faulkner writes of "lascivious, heartless, unprincipled women."[1] Although the reviewer does not elaborate, the sexual irregularity they refer to is doubtless Dewey Dell's premarital sex, Addie's extramarital affair, and perhaps MacGowan's rape of Dewey Dell. The review's language suggests that the writer views Faulkner's female characters in such a negative way because of this "sexual irregularity." The reviewer fails to recognize that this sexuality was the only form of autonomy that Addie could assert in her life, and

[1] Granville Hicks, "The Past and Future of William Faulkner," The Bookman, September 1931, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 17-8.

that Dewey Dell was not "lascivious" at all, but rather a victim of Lafe and MacGowan because of the harmful idea that unmarried women do not deserve control over their reproduction and because of her lack of ability to speak about issues of reproduction because of her poverty and southerness. Faulkner progressively refuses to reinforce the restrictive understanding of sexual morality that this reviewer articulates. Instead, as I have argued, Faulkner renders these allegedly "heartless, unprincipled" women as the moral centers of the novel, highlighting how their constrained position in society robs them of any autonomy and creating a unique moral situation in which it is positive for them to be able to assert autonomy in any way possible. Moreover, Faulkner portrays Addie and Dewey Dell as victims due to their lack of knowledge about or access to ways to control their reproduction, a key point that this reviewer misses completely.

Other Northern reviewers similarly read the Bundrens as despicable characters, a reading I view as a misinterpretation of the novel and an illustration of northerners' failure to understand and appreciate the difficult lives of poor white southerners at the time. In the enduring and progressive northern weekly, *The Nation*, the reviewer writes: "Mr. Faulkner is quite capable of handling the more normal aspects of humanity; but out of an undoubtedly honest perversity he remains disturbingly faithful to the old lechers, his brutal drug-store clerks, his sexual inverts, and his insane dreamers. Mentally disintegrated types (unless the disintegration is of a subtle and complicated character) are not a very rich mind for investigation…"[2] In this excerpt, the reviewer expresses their belief that Faulkner's characters are "mentally disintegrated types"

[2] Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, "Morbidity in Fiction," *The Nation*, November 5, 1930, Vol. 131, No. 3409, p. 501.

without the subtly and complexity that would make people like this worth writing about. This view is objectively incorrect, as scholars today, myself included, would argue that these characters are written with a subtly and nuance. The nuance highlights that the characters are not innately "mentally disintegrated," but rather that their mental disintegration results from their lived reality as poor white southerners. If Dewey Dell were to be considered mentally disintegrated, for example, it would only be because of her abject poverty, lack of access to education, lack of bodily autonomy, and responsibility to inherit the domestic, field, and reproductive labor her mother did before her. Several other period reviews similarly label the Bundrens as essentially "mentally disintegrated," as "madmen," "idiots," "perverts," "psychologically abnormal," with "wicked propensities," "distorted and neurotic," or my favorite, "peasants with weird streaks of poetry."[3] The most accurate description I found, yet hardly enlightening in any other way, is that the Bundrens are a "poor and ignorant family."[4] These limited and distorted descriptions provide evidence that even educated northern readers could neither comprehend nor appreciate the lives of suffering and deprivation that those like the Bundrens endure in the rural South. This incomprehensibility manifests in an attribution of decay to the characters rather than to the situation they live in; it is easier to blame the people themselves than to try to

[3] Basil Davenport, "In the Mire," The Saturday Review of Literature, November 22, 1930, Vol. 1, No. 18, p. 362; Gornam Munson, "Our Post-War Novel," The Bookman, October 1931, Vol. 74, No. 2, p.142; Alan Reynolds Thompson, "The Cult of Cruelty," The Bookman, January-February 1932, Vol. 74, No.2, p. 478-9; Hicks, "The Past and Future of William Faulkner," p.18; RWB Lewis, "The Hero in the New World: William Faulkner's The Bear," The Kenyon Review, Autumn 1951, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 643; James Burnham, "Trying to Say," The Symposium, January 1931, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 52; Cape and Smith, "Mordibity in Fiction," p.500.

[4] Kenneth White, "Notes on Novels," The New Republic, November 19, 1930, Vol. 65, No. 833, p. 27.

understand the complicated history and societal forces that render them this way. These reviews also illustrate how Faulkner's fiction contributes to and enriches history, for the novel functions to widen readers' understanding of the lives of people whom history typically erases or leaves out. Indeed, Faulkner's historical contributions are especially significant insofar as how the novel centers poor southern white women like Addie and Dewey Dell, whose stories and lives were nearly excluded from historical accounts.

Although I could only find one review of Faulkner's novel from a southern periodical, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, this review is surprisingly similar to the reviews from the North in its negative feelings toward the Bundrens. This resemblance could be explained because wealthier southerners or southerners living in bigger cities could not understand the lives of people like the Bundrens. Or perhaps the reviewer writes negatively about the Bundrens and the novel to distance and disown its portrayals of southern society. Ironically, the review highlights the progressive nature of the novel as it shows how Faulkner, despite his love for the South, depicts it in a way that other southerners were uncomfortable with. The reviewer writes: "It is difficult indeed to find anywhere a more horrible pageant of degeneracy than Mr. Faulkner sets forth. His characters are all incompetents, morons, idiots, and he presents them with… relentless faithfulness."[5] The reviewer interprets the characters of the novel as all degenerates, missing the complexities and causes of the unique and troubled identities that Faulkner gives the Bundrens. Indeed, and as with Dewey Dell, Faulkner arguably reveals that the Bundren children might have had the potential for success, but the abject poverty,

[5] John Donald Wade, "The South in its Fiction," Virginia Quarterly Review, January 1931, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 125.

ignorance, and deprivation they must suffer in the rural South leaves them appearing as "idiots" or "morons." Whether the reviewer, as a Southern person of likely higher economic status, was unable to recognize Faulkner's fictional diagnosis of social, economic, and political deprivation because of the difference in their own Southern experience, or purposefully chooses to read the Bundrens' troubling traits as essential rather than attributable to their status and location to avoid the damning implications this would have for the state of the South is uncertain. But, the reviewer concludes that the novel is: "As great… as anybody has achieved who has set out from a standard West-European background of respectability to identify himself with hopeless squalor and hopeless misery and hopeless impotence."[6] Implicit in this claim is that the reviewer does not think that an accomplished white southerner writer, like Faulkner, who has overcome the limitations of his southerness and produced nationally esteemed works should write about people like the Bundrens. This implication further highlights the progressiveness of the novel. Faulkner chose to include the Bundrens in the world of Yoknapatawpha County to paint a full and realistic picture of the lives of all people living in the South, not just wealthy southerners, even though doing so might jeopardize his status as a nationally respected author, and despite the fact that other southern literary writers like this reviewer were more comfortable leaving these realities unseen or unexposed. In contrast, Faulkner showed his love for the South not only through uplifting it and its people, but by critiquing it through showing the lives of those the wealthy southerners try to ignore.

[6] Wade, "The South in its Fiction," pp. 125-6.

Despite its celebrated status today, *As I Lay Dying* was initially read a failure for Faulkner; as these period reviews evidence, the novel was criticized for its focus on poor southern white people, and especially poorer southern white women and their sexuality. The fact that Faulkner chose to write and publish a book about these people rejected by a majority of society provides further evidence of the novel's progressive attempt to center Addie and Dewey Dell Bundren and bring attention to their lives and struggles, especially their reproductive struggles and its connections to both their southern lived reality and the national birth control movement and conversations. The context of the reviews highlight how Faulkner does not show the same beliefs as the reviewers who see poor southerners as inherently degenerate and tries to counter this belief in the novel by showing how it is the conditions of the South and its relationship to the North that makes them present this way. The reviews also clarify what is distinct about Faulkner's literary southerness: proud of his southern heritage, Faulkner was not willing to cover up the negative realities of the South and its society that needed redress and remedy so that everyone, even the poorest people and women, might live a good southern life.

Conclusion

In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner reconstructs and then complicates the historical stereotypes of the two sorts of women who would use birth control, Addie as the suffering mother who gets her revenge and Dewey Dell as the sexually active unmarried woman who turns out to be a victim. He destabilizes these historical stereotypes through his characters' identities as poor white southern women. He complicates those stereotypes further by writing into his female characters' lives acts of resistance and

freedom despite the historical generalization that these women had no autonomy: Addie's affair with Whitfield and her dying wish to be buried in Jefferson and Dewey Dell's moral subjectivity in spite of her lack of education. None of this would be as visible without the historical context that reveals how the larger birth control movement led to the exclusion of poor rural women and to the creation of the dual constructions of those deserving and undeserving of birth control, and the history of poor white southern womanhood that reveals the lives of these women were overwhelming characterized as without autonomy.

The historical context of these stereotypes and identities and the real women who came to embody them clarify how Faulkner used Addie and Dewey Dell to contribute to the period debate on birth control. He portrays Addie as a woman who is driven to "immoral" actions, her affair with Whitfield, in part because of her lack of control over her own reproduction. Read in the context of period reproductive debates and realities, Faulkner's portrayal of Addie emerges as a progressive representation of a woman reasserting her own autonomy and going against the limiting role that society slots her into. Faulkner renders Addie's sexual freedom positively, since he characterizes Jewel, as the result of the affair, as her "salvation."[1] As I've argued, he reveals her affair as defying the corrupt morality of the Southern patriarchy.

More importantly, Faulkner disrupts the stereotypical narrative of the young, sexually promiscuous girl who would abuse birth control if given access to it. He complicates this stereotype by showing that Dewey Dell did not give her full consent in the first place, and how the stereotype and Dewey Dell's semblance to it empowers

[1] Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 97.

MacGowan to take advantage by giving her false information and then raping her. Reading Dewey Dell as promiscuous and sexually active licenses him to mislead and abuse her. In contrast, Faulkner constructs Dewey Dell as a sympathetic victim, and humanizes the abstract construction of the promiscuous woman, encouraging his 1930s audience to question the discourse created by the birth control movement and churches and to realize that women like Dewey Dell do not deserve judgement and abuse. They instead deserve the same access to information about birth control that the movement fought to bring to privileged mothers wanting to control their reproduction. Faulkner further complicates the stereotype of the promiscuous unmarried woman both by revealing Dewey Dell's untapped creative and intellectual potential which her identity as a poor southern white woman unjustly limits, and by infusing her, despite her vicitimization, with the autonomy that her intelligence enables her to assert through moral subjectivity. Faulkner speaks through and for the real women that these characters resemble and represent, bringing awareness to their struggle and condemning the societal forces that contribute to their oppression and lack of reproductive autonomy.

Faulkner's contribution to the debate on women's reproductive rights and autonomy also helps us understand him as both a southern writer and as an author whose works contain themes and values that extend far beyond the fictional Yoknapatawpha County to the entire United States during the Depression. In constructing and complicating Addie and Dewey Dell as the suffering mother and the promiscuous unmarried women respectively, Faulkner shows his knowledge of broader national trends and ideas surrounding women's reproductive rights and autonomy that

stretch beyond the South. However, he explores this larger debate in the context of the South, through women characters whose reproductive rights and autonomy are also shaped specifically by their southernness, abject poverty, ruralness, and whiteness. Faulkner knew women like Addie and Dewey Dell personally because of his identity as a southern man and his choice to live in the South for most of his life. He writes about their lives and struggles with a level of insight and depth unavailable to most if not all northern authors. While his fictional responses to the national conversation on birth control may have been informed by period articles like the ones I discussed above and by discussions with northern women, his portrayal of southern women's reproductive struggle was significantly informed by his interactions with and observations of real southern women like Addie and Dewey Dell. While Faulkner's themes in *As I Lay Dying* carried relevance for the country as a whole, the novel remains essentially a southern novel that expresses Faulkner's unique vision as a southern author. Although the novel exposes and critiques the South for the ways in which its poverty and patriarchy dramatically limit the potential for southerners, especially southern women, it nonetheless reveals Faulkner's enduring love for Mississippi and the region. He criticizes the South and identifies problems that need to be addressed to make it better and to enable it to fulfill its greatest potential.

The characters of Dewey Dell and Addie also clarify how literature can be productively read as history. Oftentimes, historical narratives and accounts can be depersonalized and overly abstracted. Traditional forms of history and historical narrative are useful because they recover and clarify broad and general understandings of historical periods or groups of people. Nonetheless, historians and students

sometimes need reminders that real people lived through these histories and faced the kinds of intersectional struggles Faulkner fictionalized in *As I Lay Dying* and that I have analyzed here. The historical context section of my thesis presents the first type of history. It tries to provide a general understanding of the larger birth control and abortion movement, how that movement was understood, interpreted, and represented by the media and religious groups at the time, especially through the constructions of the two opposing types of women searching for birth control, as well as the lives of poor southern white women like Addie and Dewey Dell in the early twentieth century. Such histories necessarily rely on generalizations and abstractions.

In *As I Lay Dying*, as I have argued, Faulkner used his knowledge of these historical movements that he lived through and observed in the South and during his travels in the rest of the country to construct individual, unique characters with their own perceptions, motivations, struggles, and desires. Although these characters are fictional, they were inspired by Faulkner's interpretation of the world around him, and as my recovery of the historical context reveals, are complex and compelling portrayals of people that lived through the realities of Faulkner's moment. Thus, in his novel, Faulkner reminds his readers of the humanity of those who lived through significant historical moments in the past. Where primary historical documents from women like those in the Bundren family are scarce, Faulkner's Addie and Dewey Dell provide a more personal and intimate look at what the lives of such women were like. His stream-of-consciousness, modernist style allows Faulkner to do this perhaps even to a greater degree than other writers who did not use such subjectivist narrative methods, because it allows the reader access into the thoughts and motivations of every important character

in the story, including Addie after her death. Like Cowley, I see Faulkner as a kind of historian. All historians have biases, and their works are shaped by these; for Faulkner, fiction was his bias. Beyond the fiction, the lives of the women he represents are realistic and convincing. His novel helps teach readers what their lives were like in a way that prioritizes their uniqueness, individuality, and humanity.

As I Lay Dying, although nearly 100 years old, remains important and relevant today in part because of its creative responses to the gendered realities and inequities of reproductive rights and autonomy in the early twentieth century. On May 2nd, 2022, about three weeks before the defense of this thesis, there was a leak of a majority opinion from the Supreme Court, authored by Justice Alito, that reveals the Court's intent to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The official opinion has still not been released, and there is a general feeling of anger and unease as we wait to see if any of the conservative justices will switch their vote in response to public pressure. This decision would result in abortion being entirely illegal in at least 22 states, including the entirety of the Deep South.[2] The opinion also refers to the need to ensure an adequate "domestic supply of infants" for the US.[3] The decisions and the predicted repercussions show that little has changed in the dominant view toward women's reproductive autonomy since Faulkner wrote the novel. The patriarchy still feels entitled to control over women's bodies and views them primarily as objects to provide reproductive labor. If this opinion becomes law, abortion will not be illegal for northerners or rich people who can travel

[2] Elizabeth Nash and Lauren Cross, "26 States are Certain or Likely to Ban Abortion Without Roe: Here's Which Ones and Why," Guttmacher Institute, October 28, 2021, https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2021/10/26-states-are-certain-or-likely-ban-abortion-without-roe-heres-which-ones-and-why.

[3] Thomas E. Dobbs, State Health Officer of the Mississippi Department of Health v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, 34.

to more progressive states. But it will be illegal for those women, like modern versions of Dewey Dell and Addie, who are poor, uneducated, and/or southern, and for the hundreds of thousands of poor people of color who live in the states where abortion will be illegal. Teenage girls, like Dewey Dell, will have their potential robbed of them by state governments that will force them to have babies they do not want. Poor women like Addie will find themselves with more children than they can afford, working themselves to death to raise and economically provide for them. *As I Lay Dying* is a fictional reminder of what the tragic results of this decision will be for so many women in the United States. As citizens of Oregon, we must not be complacent with the knowledge that our reproductive rights will be safe, at least for now. We must stand up for and stand with those who will lose their reproductive autonomy and recognize and advocate for abortion as a fundamental right, and treat the lack of access to safe abortion as a violation of human rights. We must do whatever we can to ensure that safe abortions are accessible to every person who wants or needs one in America, for whatever reason. If we do not, there is no telling how many thousands of victims the Supreme Court decision will create in populations that are already the most vulnerable.

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