

# A STUDY IN THE ENGLISH OF W. FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

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## PREFACE

This is a study of the English used in *As I Lay Dying* from a linguistic point of view. Since all the fifteen characters whose narrations make up the story are inhabitants of Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha" county, this may be called a study of Yoknapatawpha dialect. And it was with a hope that this investigation would become the foundation of any further study of the English spoken by Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha whites — no negroes speak in this story — that I took up this project.

Only those linguistic features that are off-standard are pointed out, and explanation is given only when it was thought necessary, for most of the off-standard features that are found in this book are also seen in some of the dialects of the United States as well as in illiterate speech, and these have been taken up in dictionaries and books on American English.

"is" on p. 389, l. 29 is a misprint for "it." Also "I" on p. 515, l. 21 seems to be an error, perhaps on the part of the author. <sup>1</sup>

Some peculiarities from the point of view of literary style present themselves, although they do not compare in quantity with those which strike the readers of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), written a short time previous to this story. Also italics are used quite frequently. Such characters as Darl and Vardaman, who are insane part of the time, break the normal style of expression. In this study, however, only those points which are irregular from a strictly grammatical point of view are called attention to at the beginning, under the title "Style."

The text used for this study is *The Sound and the Fury & As I Lay Dying* (New York : Random House [1946]).

## Chapter I STYLE

Omission of punctuation marks : Passages where punctuation marks have been omitted are found in the following pages and the effect produced in all these cases is powerful.

P. 423 : The style is suitable to express the confused feeling in a nightmare.

P. 446 f : Only paragraphing is done. "Darl" is sometimes written "darl." This shows confusion and excitement that follow continuously one after another and is effective.

P. 489 : This is a short reproduction of a drawn talk which went on unceasingly, and on and on.

P. 524 : There is no period when Vardaman speaks.

P. 527 : There are six yeses and eight yeses in succession with no punctuation in between. When "yes" is uttered quickly in succession, this reproduction is the natural method.

Omission of quotation marks : Illiterate people seldom use the indirect narration. Also when the reported sentences are reproduced quotation marks are sometimes omitted. When a writer tries to reproduce only what he hears, this omission is natural. Faulkner uses a capital letter to begin a reported sentence in such a case.

e. g. When I said What doctor you want to see, she said she want to see the doctor that works here and when I said There ain't any doctor works here (p. 517).

A sentence is split :

e. g. 5. ...because the stress is sideways.

6. Except.

7. A body is not square like a cross-tie. (p. 397)

Extra space before and after the word "clopping": This appears twice on p. 525. This device gives a little pause and is effective.

## Chapter II PRONUNCIATION

It is evident that Faulkner tried to reproduce the illiterate language as well as the dialectal peculiarities of his Yoknapatawpha whites. In this book the pronunciation of these people is shown by spelling the words as nearly as they were spoken. The extent to which Faulkner exerted his efforts in this respect may be seen in the following examples:

He *kilt* her (p. 383)<sup>2</sup>

but I couldn't see noboby *a-tall* at first (p. 387)

How 'bout it, Doc? (p. 403)

you...go home and tell *you* pa or your brothers (p. 487)

*Gimme* the medicine first (p. 522)

In carrying out this method Faulkner is more sparing than John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, to take an example among his contemporary novelists.

From the modified spelling seen in this work, the following characteristics may be pointed out.

### I Vowels

The standard vowels in the first column appear in this book as those in the second column, as can be seen in the examples which follow.

[ ε ] — [ i ]    *e. g.*    git, gittin', keer, sitting, yit.

                  — [ ɒ ]    *e. g.*    sot.

[ æ ] — [ ε ]    *e. g.*    ketch, set.

                  — [ ɪ ]    *e. g.*    kin.

                  — [ ɑr ]    *e. g.*    marster.

[ ɑ ] — [ ʌ ]    *e. g.*    ruther.

                  — [ ɔ ]    *e. g.*    paw, maw.

[Λ] — [ɪ] e. g. jist, sich.

"of"      *e. g.* Course, if the boys wants to go  
to bed (p. 415)

“dassent” for “doesn’t” *e. g.* Pa dassent sweat (p. 355)

un- *e. g.* unlamped; unwinded.

With a suffix :

-ant *e. g.* calculant; recapitulant; repudiant; uninferant.

### Parasynthetic compounds

- i Nouns : bridge-piling; eye-bump; gripping-surface;  
horse-physic.
- ii Verbs : over-end; pussel-gut.
- iii Adjectives : brick-hard; dust-dark; earth-free; flare-out;  
flesh-and-bone; iron-slick; near-naked; re-accruent;  
shoulder-deep; warmish-cool; balloon-like; leach-like;  
owl-like; pistol-like.

(Past participle in form) arch-necked; awry-feathered; awry-haired; back-thrust; bone-gaunted; crop-toothed; dangle-armed; duck-shaped; gap-mouthed; good-sized; grease-fouled; hard-nosed; high-kneed; hook-winged; lace-trimmed; laid-by; midsunk; saw-dusted; slack-faced; slack-mouthed; stiff-brimmed; sulphur-coloured; thick-nosed; tooth-cropped; two-timed; water-jointed; wooden-backed.

(Present participle in form) green-eating; spine-jolting.

## II NONCE USE

Verb "be" is used as a noun.

*e. g.* And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. Yet the wagon *is*, because when the wagon is *was*, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am is.

(p. 396)<sup>4</sup>

Because if I had one, it is *was*. And if it is was, it can't be *is*. (p. 409)

That's why I am not *is*. *Are* is too many for one woman to foal. (p. 409)

## Chapter IV GRAMMAR

### I THE NOUN

Anomalies in number :

“foot” for “feet” *e. g.* Twenty-eiget foot, four and a half  
inches (p. 402)

“people” used as singular *e. g.* It takes two people to make you,  
and one people to die. (p. 365)

“son of a bitcnes” used as plural. <sup>5</sup>

### II THE PRONOUN

“hit” used for “it” *e. g.* Hit never bothered me none (p. 515)  
I got hit (p. 367)

objective case used for subjective :

“me” for “I” *e. g.* me and the boys would get her there  
me and her (p. 351) (p. 350)

And now I got to pay for it, me without a  
tooth in my head (p. 364)<sup>6</sup>

“him” for “he” *e. g.* him and Darl (p. 371)  
His voice is bigger than him. (p. 403)

The following instances in which the objective “him” precedes  
a present participle or an infinitive are worth noticing.

*e. g.* and him watching me and him flying into  
tantrums (p. 352)

Not him to come and tell her good-bye  
(p. 352)

him prancing along on a durn circus animal  
and her wanting us all to be in the wagon  
with her (p. 411)

“her” for “she” *e. g.* me and her (p. 351)

Subjective case used for objective :

“who” for “whom” *e. g.* who He loveth (p. 415)

Absolute possessive pronouns :

“ourn” for “ours” *e. g.* She’ll want to go in ourn. (p. 349)

There are also “hisn” and “hern.”

Reflexive pronouns :

“you” for “yourself” *e. g.* you lay you down and rest (p. 363)

“hissel” for “himself” *e. g.* looking ahead of hisself (p. 349)

Demonstrative pronouns :

“that” for “those” *e. g.* that three dollars (p. 349)

“them” for “those” *e. g.* them others sitting there (p. 347)  
them of her blood waiting for her there  
(p. 350)

### III THE ADJECTIVE

Irregular superlative degree : curiousest.

Adjective used as adverb : bad, careful, cheerful, hearty, pure,  
quiet.

Noun used as adjective : fool. *e. g.* fool, ethics (p. 336)

### IV THE ARTICLE

Anomalies are seen in the use of indefinite articles “a” and “an” :

“a” used where “an” is expected : *e. g.* a other; owl’s a face; a hour;  
aunla belled bottle.

“an” used where “a” is expected : *e. g.* an supper et (p. 386)

“a” is used where it is unnecessary : *e. g.* Peabody mought have been to  
ere a one of a dozen houses.  
(p. 386)

there was ere a one of them  
horses left (p. 415)

In the above two examples “a” seems to be a part of the expression “ere a” inserted.

“a” misplaced: *e. g.* a such misfortunate man (p. 452)

## V THE VERB

### i. Conjugation

Present form used for past :                      come,<sup>7</sup> give, run, see.

Present form used for past participle :        give.

Past form used for past participle :           broke, drove, fell, took,  
wore.

Past participle form used for past :    begun, drunk, forseen, ~~seen~~,  
sprung, sung, swum, taken.

Regular past form used for irregular past :    knowed, growed, throwed.

Regular past participle form used for irregular past participle :  
biowed, mangrowed.

Also such anomalies as the following are seen :

“brung” for “brought” (past)

“holp” for “helped” (past participle)

“riz” for “risen”

“et” for “ate” and “eaten”

“setting” for “sitting”

“laid” for “lay”

“lay” for “lie”

A number of present participles with the “a-” prefix are met with :

a-bolstering; a-coming; a-fanning; a-going; a-hammering;

a-happening; a-laying (for lying); a-moving; a-offering;

a-ruining; a-shutting; a-slaving; a-thinking.

The following example in which a normal present participle and the same with an “a” prefix appear in succession is noteworthy :

me and Addie slaving and a-slaving. (p. 363)



## ii. Concord

- Sing. subject with pl. verb : *e.g.* Picking and choosing he  
were by then (p. 473)  
he don't know it. (p. 380)
- Pl. subject with sing. verb : *e.g.* They was in the kitchen  
(p. 379)  
There was old men (p. 415)
- "you" with 3rd person sing verb : *e.g.* when you fixes so folks can  
say (p. 421)  
you was down here.

"I says" appears often.

## iii. Tense

Carelessness in the sequence of tenses :

This happens when a speaker begins his narration with such words as "I knowed," "I thought," "I told," or "It happened."

*e.g.* I told Anse it likely won't be no need. (p. 360)

Also such confusion in tenses as the following are seen :

he had been there and *saw* us (p. 356)

But couldn't no woman *strove* harder than Addie (p. 364)

I did not *said* to God to *made* me in the country. (p. 385)

The rain was blowing on to the lamp, hissing on it so I  
*am* scared every minute *it'll* break (p. 388)<sup>8</sup>

It seems difficult for uneducated people to express *perfect tense*. Very often the auxiliary "have" is forgotten.

*e.g.* You been here often enough (p. 349)

It'd taken them (p. 401)

they wouldn't ever had any reason (p. 488)

When "have" is forgotten after "to," either past or past participle follows.

*e. g.* She ought to taken (p. 341)

Yon ought to took time. (p. 381)

I'd have had better sense than to done what I just done.  
(p. 436)

Here is an interesting examle :

You ought to let them taken your mule (p. 435).

In this sentence "taken" in past participle form seems to give a sense of "completed action" to the forgoing verb "let," which is normally preceded by "have."

Also "taken and + past participle" is used to show perfect tense.

*e. g.* Jewel's taken and gone (p. 367)

the rain come up after I taken and left. (p. 390)

Tull taken and cut them two big whiteoaks. (p. 439)

"done" is used to add the sense of completion.

a. Only "done" is added to the principal verb :

*e. g.* I done holp hime (p. 360)

I done put supper on (p. 383)

b. "done" is inserted between the auxiliary and principal verbs :

*e. g.* I had done left (p. 389)

she had done give up folks (p. 449)

In such cases "done" seems to give the sense "already,"<sup>9</sup> but there are instances in which both "done" and "already" are used together in one sentence :

*e. g.* I done already wrote this visit on to my books (p. 367)

He's done already asleep (p. 419)

In the following examples the unnecessary auxiliary "have" —written "a" or "a'" here—seems to have been inserted between the auxiliary "had" and the principal verbs. Perhaps the speakers were not conscious of "a" but spoke merely in the manner of

sentences like "he would 'a' suspicioned it" (p. 509) :

- e. g.* if He'd a aimed for man to be always a-moving (p. 362)  
if I hadn't a stopped him (p. 410)  
if her eyes had a been pistols, I wouldn't be talking now.  
(p. 417)

#### iv. Subjunctive Mood

Indicative mood used for subjunctive :

- e. g.* as though he is not listening much. (p. 349)  
If he was to come tomorrow (p. 350)  
like he is hoping all the time he really can't do it and  
can quit trying to. (p. 359)  
If it was just up, we could drive across (p. 425)

Optative sentences :

- e. g.* I be durn if it didn't give me the creeps (p. 388)  
His grace be upon this house (p. 401)

### V SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

Inversion in word order :

- e. g.* Can't no man say I don't aim to keep my word (p. 417)  
but that was the very reson couldn't nobody hold it  
personal. (p. 513)

This occurs when a negative auxiliary verb is used.

Repetition of subject :

- e. g.* the fiew door it was too heavy for me (p. 385)  
Most folks that logs..., they need a durn good farm  
(p. 440)

Omission :

- subject : *e. g.* Don't reckon I'll get to you this week  
(p. 360)

- Seems like I can't get my mind on  
nothing (p. 360)<sup>10</sup>
- relative pronoun : *e. g.* There's not a woman in this section  
could ever bake (p. 342)  
Who is that man can do that? (p. 403)
- conjunction : *e. g.* it was her own blood sawed out the boards  
(p. 351)
- verb "be" : *e. g.* You welcome to the house (p. 471)  
let me on that wagon (p. 442)  
And it fixing to storm too. (p. 387)  
My team all right? (p. 399)
- verb "do" : *e. g.* What you think, Darl? (p. 426)

As most of the characters are ignorant and careless in speech there are many sentences that are loose in construction. The shifting in points of view is one of the features in this type of sentence :

- e. g.* Because I said If couldn't keep on sawing and nailing at  
it until a man can't sleep even and her hands laying on  
the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash  
and you couldn't get them clean. (p. 347)  
If it had just been me when Cash fell off that church  
and if it had just been me when pa laid sick with that  
load of wood fell on him (p. 347)  
it's always men can't rest (p. 362)  
when if it hadn't been no road come there (p. 363)  
There was a shoat come by (p. 451)  
Just because you have been a faithful wife is no sign  
(p. 459)  
if there can ever be any excuse for sin, which it can't be.  
(p. 488)

There are cases in which a sentence is not complete but depends upon the foregoing one for context. This may be a more faithful reproduction of what is going on in the person's mind than the conventional sentence construction.

- e. g.* And now them others sitting there, like buzzards

Waiting, fanning themselves. (p. 347)

he walks on it that came and did it. That came and did it when (p. 376)

After she bought whatever she would finally decide on.  
Or tell that she wanted. (p. 484)

Expressions that are peculiar or worth noticing :

*e. g.* The stubble gives his lower face that appearance that old dogs have. (p. 349)

I hope it. (p. 357)

I so hope it. (p. 360)

I saw when it did not be her. (p. 386)

For the Lord aimed for him to do (p. 389)

Listening to us tell (p. 417)

I heard tell how (p. 439)

I hear tell. (p. 440)

folks had been lying to him about it being gone (p. 424)

We fixed Cash's leg so it doesn't hurt. (p. 493)

The moon is not dark too. (p. 524)

("like" or "because" is not repeated in the latter part of the sentence.)

It was like he was trying hard to do them ; that he was as puzzled as anyone else. (p. 428)

like it wasn't the same bridge a-tall and that them that would walk up outen the water . . . must come (p. 435)

because it was threatening rain again, and that supper was about ready. (p. 418)

(Peculiar expressions with infinitive)

The Lord made it to grow. (p. 403)

I don't reckon one need worry. (p. 434)

and it to do all over again (p. 435)

That was my duty to him, to not ask that (p. 465)

he said to bring (p. 481)

You needn't to cry (p. 503)

(Double negatives)

without no mistake (p. 359)

I never had no time to cook it. (p. 381)

You couldn't hardly see them. (p. 419)

can't no man call me that. (p. 507)

(Triple negatives)

it won't be no need for them to rush back, noways  
(p. 357)

I ain't no call to expect no more of him than (p. 364)

## NOTES

- 1 If Faulkner's words are to be taken literally, *As I Lay Dying* was written "in six weeks, without changing a word." (Author's introduction to William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (New York: Random House [1932]), vi.
- 2 The italics in the quotations are, unless otherwise stated, the present writer's.
- 3 Cf. Henry L. Mencken, *The American Sanguage*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p. 471.
- 4 Italics in these three examples are the author's.
- 5 Cf. "Bitches!" he said, quite loud. "Sons of bitches!" (William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 102).
- 6 In this sentence "me" is in emphatic position.
- 7 It may be that in some cases the past participle "come" was used instead.
- 8 There is another instance of this on pp. 395-96.
- 9 See done: Used colloquially or ignorantly as an emphatic element with the force of "already," "entirely," in past or perfect tenses. Dictionary of American English
- 10 "seems like" is almost a phrase adverb in this case.