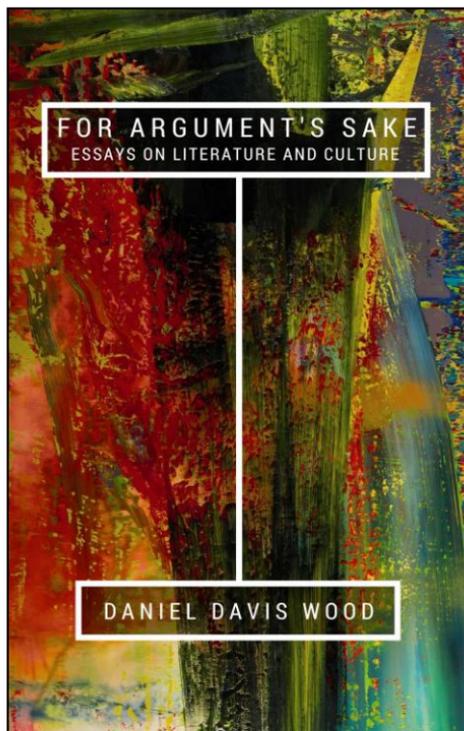


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 217-220.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



www.danieldaviswood.com

FAULKNER'S STRUCTURAL IMAGERY

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (22 May 2011).

UPON REREADING WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*, I WAS struck by this passage in Darl's eighth monologue, which appears just as Anse, Cash, Jewel, and Darl first attempt to raise and bear Addie Bundren's coffin:

We lower it carefully down the steps. We move, balancing it as though it were something infinitely precious, our faces averted, breathing through our teeth to keep our nostrils dosed. We go down the path, toward the slope.

'We better wait,' Cash says. 'I tell you it ain't balanced now. We'll need another hand on that hill.'

'Then turn loose,' Jewel says. He will not stop. Cash begins to fall behind, hobbling to keep up, breathing harshly; then he is distanced and Jewel carries the entire front end alone, so that, tilting as the path begins to slant, it begins to rush away from me and slip down the air like a sled upon invisible snow, smoothly evacuating atmosphere in which the sense of it is still shaped. (89)

Although Faulkner claimed to have hammered out *As I Lay Dying* in a single six-week burst of creativity, examinations of the original manuscript have since put the lie to that story. Does the novel as published also undermine Faulkner's claim insofar as its evident complexities and nuances make a six-week creation implausible? The above passage is one nuance that seems to me to show enough self-reflexivity on Faulkner's part — enough consciousness of what his novel was doing as he went about piecing it together — for the novel to display some self-awareness, via imagery, of its own structure. With its dozen or so narrators each detailing events in the wake of Addie Bundren's death, the novel at once establishes Addie as an absence and yet conveys a sense of the strength of her former presence. It locates ghostly traces of the dead woman in the midst of those who once knew her, in much the same way that her runaway coffin lingers like a spirit in this gathering of her husband and three

sons. The coffin thus offers a slight and subtle visual expression of the structural principle upon which the entire novel rests — a tip of the hat to the absence that animates the novel as a whole.

What's particularly striking about the above passage, though, is that this sort of structural self-awareness isn't a device that Faulkner reserved solely for *As I Lay Dying*. In fact, it caught my attention less because I opened *As I Lay Dying* with an interest in its structure than because I remembered encountering the same sort of device when I last read *Light in August*. Here is the famous passage from that novel with which the persecution of the deracinated Joe Christmas begins:

Looking, he can see the smoke low on the sky, beyond an imperceptible corner; he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has traveled further than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. 'And yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years,' he thinks. 'But I have never got outside the circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo,' he thinks quietly, sitting on the seat, with planted on the dashboard before him the shoes, the black shoes smelling of negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves. (255)

An unwavering street forms a straight line locked inside a circle. Walk the line as Joe has been walking for some thirty years and sooner or later you'll collide with the circle that has surrounded you the entire time. The line within the circle isn't just a visualisation of Joe's dilemma and the doom that awaits him; it too translates the structure of a novel into imagery. The first nine chapters of *Light in August* grant Joe Christmas almost no attention. Instead, they follow the travails of Lena Grove, her runaway lover Lucas Bunch, her good friend Byron Burch, and the Reverend Hightower, essentially sketching out the inhabitants of the small town of Jefferson — the townsfolk at whose hands Joe will ultimately be persecuted — while

Joe is left to stalk around in the background. The significance of the unwavering street and the suggestion that Joe has been walking it all his life only come to occupy the centre of the novel in Chapter 10. As the novel observes the interactions of those other characters, then, it obtains an almost literally circumspective view of the town of Jefferson before throwing Joe Christmas into the heart of it, drifting slowly around the various townsfolk in a way that draws out the circle into which Joe's straight line finally and fatefully collides.

Works Cited

- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. 1935. London: Vintage, 2007. Print.
— . *Light in August*. 1932. London: Vintage, 2005. Print.