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Exploring the Nature of Individual Identity in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*

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**Exploring the Nature of Individual Identity in
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Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth***

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Donald Kartiganer writes that *As I Lay Dying* (1930) “moves closer to [...] that quality of a fiction coming apart in the spaces between well-made lines” (24) as if the true meaning of Faulkner’s work lies not in what is written but what is omitted. This concept of validation by means of omission or negation is prevalent throughout the novel. In fact, the language of the novel suggests this very concept. Faulkner explores the Bundren family’s inability to communicate their grief over the loss of Addie Bundren, the matriarch, to one another and to themselves in *As I Lay Dying* by illuminating the inadequacies of language. In allowing the language of his novel to shift towards a priori representations, Faulkner ultimately shows that the

individual is inherently alone and the barriers that words instill will prevent his characters from making significant relationships.

If Faulkner explores the inadequacy of language among his characters to demonstrate his own frustration with meaning and intended message, then Chris Ware explores the disparity between words and action in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). The basic structure of the graphic novel lends itself to the idea that words alone are inadequate, requiring drawings to help form a more complete picture. In fact, there are moments when Ware uses only pictures to describe memories, emotions, or a train of thought in ways which are not permitted to William Faulkner based on his medium. However, there are instances where both Ware and Faulkner make it apparent that a life of action is far better than a life based on words given the potential for deception that is inherent in language. Chris Ware's semi-autobiographical character, Jimmy Corrigan, confirms this deception in his inability to act decisively, suggesting that inertia simply results from language's inadequacy to describe an intended meaning.

Because the characters' need to find a balance between reality and the lexicon of language that they use to represent their reality remains largely unsolved in *As I Lay Dying* and *Jimmy Corrigan*, William Faulkner and Chris Ware find ways of illuminating their characters' fractured identities through an intricate interpretation of the Oedipus complex. Both texts deal with the consequences of failing fathers who are absent and neglectful to their children.

Combined with the insufficiency of language to bridge the gap between human relationships, the male characters in *As I Lay Dying* and *Jimmy Corrigan* undergo a skewed Oedipal recognition. Although Faulkner never explicitly depicts any of his male characters as having an Oedipus complex, it is evident that Addie Bundren's sons, Jewel and Darl, express the fundamental need to destroy their mother's sexuality. Ware, on the other hand, is more graphic. In many of Jimmy Reed's fantasies, the young boy is shown killing his father and then immediately transitioning to a sexual encounter with a woman who closely resembles his mother. By exhibiting the shortcomings of parental influence, Faulkner and Ware raise important questions about the irreversibility of identity as a result of parental absence and presence.

In order to understand the rejection of Addie Bundren as a sexual character, it is important to understand her sexuality and the effects it has on her family. Because of Addie's abstract conception of language, she refuses to believe in the "love" that Anse says he has for her. Addie believes that words are empty "vessels" (Faulkner 173); they are a hollow representation of the act they symbolize linguistically. Without the act of love to fill in the vessel, Addie cannot accept Anse's word. Thus, Anse is a man of words, and like his words, his love is a shapeless reference to nothingness. In fact, it is not so much the difference in language that separates Addie from her husband as much as it is Anse's inability to act. He refuses to define the word "love" with the ineffable passion of love itself. She feels fooled by Anse's deception, and to counteract this betrayal,

she commits adultery with a minister named Whitfield. Addie's love affair with Whitfield is far more profound than anything shared with Anse, and she admits that the part of her body which was physically violated by the consummation of her marriage "is in the shape of a _____" (Faulkner 165).

Faulkner represents the female form as a blank slate in the same manner that he attributes emptiness to words: Addie's body is simply a shape to fill a lacking and that which fills the lack will fulfill the woman. If Addie's words are like jars which contain the essence of what the word describes (Faulkner 165), then her vagina is similarly an empty receptacle until it is full. However, Anse is an empty representation, and Addie cannot find fulfillment in him. In fact, she is more autonomous by her very commitment to action than Faulkner's description of her sexuality permits. She may be a blank receptacle, but she fills that emotional and physical emptiness by replacing the vague lexicon of words with concise and definitive action. Addie Bundren describes her reasons for committing adultery when she explains:

I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them [...]. That was my duty to him, to not ask that, and that duty I fulfilled. I would be I; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word. That was more than he asked because he could not have asked for that and been Anse, using himself so with a word [...] I would lie by him in the dark [...] hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words

are the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in peoples' lacks, coming down like the cries of geese. (166)

Addie describes her sexuality in relation to Anse as perfunctory. Sex serves one purpose, one duty, which belongs exclusively to her husband. Though he physically fills in her empty space, the act itself cannot violate the isolation she feels in the same way that words serve to separate her from what she truly feels. Yet, when she is full of passion and acts out of love by sleeping with Reverend Whitfield, Addie finds fulfillment. Therefore, action is the only way by which Addie can be fulfilled sexually. Addie must act *against* Anse and *with* Whitfield, using her body not as a representational abstraction but as an engaging part of reality. In choosing a minister to manifest the sin of adultery, Addie remains true to her personal philosophy and physically acts out her love of Whitfield and hatred for Anse simultaneously.

Though Addie is committed to a life of action, the physical fulfillment she finds in Reverend Whitfield is an active contradiction. Addie believes that she has found a connection in Whitfield that eludes words because of his role in the community as a minister and the nature of their sin. Addie confesses her true feelings, she admits:

I would think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the world's face, of the circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I; the sin more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained

by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created [...]. I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air. (Faulkner 174-75)

Somehow Addie's affair is exactly how she would have it; the sin she commits is no longer an abstract word defined by social values but a mark of profound love rooted in the essence of sin. As T. H. Adamowski writes, "the dialectic of aloneness and violation [in Addie's conception of words and action] is repeated, but at a higher and theological level" because Reverend Whitfield is not just a man but also "the necessary link between Addie and the deity" (211). Whitfield replaces Addie's "God," who in turn blesses her with a child before ending the affair. In contrast to Anse who reflects only the emptiness of words, Whitfield fills the spiritual and physical void in Addie. Thus, it is out of this profound love for Whitfield and intentional act of defiance that Jewel is born, his name alone resounding with the significance he will have in her life.

Unfortunately, Jewel does not share the same love for his mother that she shares for him, and herein lies the complication. Because he was born out of what Addie would consider a true form of love, she dotes on him, catering to him above all of her other children. According to Adamowski, the Bundren children are divided into a kind of hierarchy; he explains:

Jewel will remain close to her all her life and will save her from 'fire and flood.' Her bond with Cash is also maintained—and confirmed every time he holds up for her inspection the boards of the coffin he builds under her eyes. Two children—Dewey Dell and Vardaman—are merely the contingent results of a necessary act of atonement, and even here Anse seems to play no part in their conceptions. One child, Darl, is a reflection of fatherly 'chapping'¹ and is thus denied all intimacy with Addie. He seems to have *happened* to her. These children appear not to have two parents. (212)

Addie's conception of love lies heavily on her belief in action. Because Jewel violated the isolation between Anse's word "love" and Addie's desire for an active love, and Cash violated the isolation of womanhood before motherhood, Addie loves these children as her own. The others she does not consider a part of her own family because they have a more direct connection to Anse, and therefore meaningless words, than they do to her. Darl came to be as a result of Anse's false "love" while Dewey Dell and Vardaman are an act of reconciliation for her adultery. Addie's love for Jewel over the other children is apparent to the whole family, so it should follow that Jewel loves his mother more than any of his siblings. Yet, Jewel rejects Addie's love once he discovers his origins, while his siblings vie for her attention. Thus, Addie's sexual transgressions ultimately manifest themselves

in her children's disjointed sense of self, precluding any escape from her influence after her death.

Darl and Jewel especially represent the dichotomy that exists in the Bundren children as they find themselves separated from one another based on two groups: those who are loved by Addie Bundren and those who are not. While Darl yearns to be looked upon favorably by his mother, Jewel scorns the attention he receives from Addie, and oddly enough, the event which acts as a catalyst for their opposing feelings is a shared one, involving several layers of deception. It was the summer of Jewel's fifteenth birthday, the summer that "he took a spell of sleeping" (Faulkner 121) as Darl calls it. Jewel had been falling asleep in the midst of his chores because he was secretly spending his nights awake, clearing forty acres for Mr. Quick to raise money to purchase a horse. The Bundren family suspected Jewel of having an affair with a married woman after spotting him coming home with the lantern at dawn, but they kept their suspicions from Addie who, in the meantime, recruited Dewey Dell and Vardaman to do the jobs around the house that Jewel left incomplete (Faulkner 121-129). It is during this course of events that Darl discovers Addie's secret, he declares:

And that may have been when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried to teach us that deceit was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important, not even poverty. And at times when I went in to go to bed she would be

sitting in the dark by Jewel where he was asleep. And I knew that she was hating herself for that deceit and hating Jewel because she had to love him so that she had to act the deceit. (Faulkner 123)

The summer of Jewel's sleeping spell proves to be one of the most traumatic for Addie, Jewel, and Darl. Evident in the nights spent watching Jewel as he sleeps, Addie's affectionate behavior attracts Darl's attention, as he is unaccustomed to such luxuries from his mother. Hence, it is in peeling back the layers of deception that Darl understands the awful truth: Jewel is not his brother and Addie will never love him like she loves Jewel. He knows that she "hates the deceit" of keeping Jewel's father's identity away from her son and hates pretending that Anse is his father even more because it violates her strict dedication to action. Thus, Addie stays awake at night loving Jewel to compensate for her pretense. Darl understands Addie's battle to reconcile action with words and silently acknowledges the deception running through the Bundren family, an act that places him outside of his family. Kenneth E. Richardson suggests that "Darl does not fit into her [Addie's] life at all" and he is "forced to live in a family where his existence does not count" (75) because Addie's notion of family lies outside of Anse and consequently outside of Anse's progeny. Darl explains that the potential for Addie to accept him as her own son depends upon a tacit understanding of Addie's betrayal and "so long as the deceit ran along quiet and monotonous, all of us [the Bundren's] let ourselves be deceived" (Faulkner

127). Although Darl might have suspected his brother to be a stranger in his own family, his mother's quiet secret prevents him from considering himself as an outsider. Compounded by Addie's death and the lost chance to reconcile with his mother, Darl finds it difficult to define himself in any terms at all. Darl admits, "I don't know that I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not" (Faulkner 80). Unloved by his mother, Darl does not find validation in his place among the Bundren family. Unlike Jewel who thinks he knows where he originates, Darl perceives himself to be an isolated branch fallen from his family tree. Darl's identity crisis "validates the woman's importance in the development of the child's identity," but at the same time it also "relies on the same old negative stereotypes of women as sexually inconstant and morally dangerous" (Blaine 101). Addie's sexuality proves to be a catalyst of deception around which the Bundren family revolves and simultaneously reinforces Faulkner's women as neither fit mothers nor autonomous sexual beings.

Furthermore, the cycle of deception extends beyond Darl, Jewel and Addie and circulates in the family until Jewel rides up to the house atop his horse after completing the work for Mr. Quick. While Addie apparently deceives Jewel into thinking he is a Bundren, his attention to Mr. Quick's farm and subsequent purchase of the horse signifies a conscious separation from the Bundren family. Ironically, it is Addie's dishonest sexual behavior that connects the Bundren family in a web of lies, but it is Jewel's perceived

sexuality that disrupts the delicate web. Once Addie sees Jewel riding on his horse, a mutual recognition occurs.

Jewel calls Addie's attention to the fact that her sin has been made public while Addie recognizes the increased isolation that Jewel feels as a result of her meaningful "actions." Therefore, Jewel's relationship with Addie is parallel to Darl's relationship with their mother, and as he realizes that he is not a part of the Bundren family, Jewel feels violated by Addie's deception, mirroring Addie's feelings of deception about Anse's "love." In essence, his heredity separates him from the ones to whom he should feel the closest, and Jewel hates his mother for isolating him from his family. Diana York Blaine sees Jewel's recognition of his mother's sexuality as the intricate way Faulkner understands the Oedipus complex in the Bundren family; she explains:

Inscribing Addie as pre-Oedipal force, Faulkner shows her suspicious of language, interested in the corporeal over the intellectual, and consumed with and by the process of mothering [...]. But in her function as a fallen epic hero, she also inhabits the position of the symbolic paternal signifier and this complicates her role as the representative of materiality-maternity-morality. (93)

Having realized Addie's sexuality extends beyond Anse's bed, Jewel sees Addie as a dominant maternal and paternal force in his life. However, her sexual expression, that is to say, the affair that she has with Reverend Whitfield, embodies the pretext under which Jewel's conception of family

has formed; consequently, Jewel displaces his love for his mother onto his horse because he knows it hurts her deeply. Thus, Addie's love becomes a simple word to Jewel, not the intended meaning that she tries to demonstrate by loving him more than any of her other children. Therefore, Jewel's decisive action to purchase a horse ironically mimics Addie's actions of taking a lover, paralleling his mother's displacement of love outside of the family.

Although Faulkner raises interesting questions about Addie's role as mother/woman and father/man in her family, there is not enough evidence to suggest that the women in his work are anything other than a product of their environmental and prescribed social roles. While Faulkner focuses on Addie's sexuality as a warped, pre-Oedipal catalyst for her children, Ware's graphic novel, which carefully distinguishes gender roles, explores the relationship between a child's identity and his mother's sexuality through the lens of paternal absence. Ware exhibits the male recognition of his mother's sexuality via the Corrigan lineage, specifically in the connection between Jimmy Reed Corrigan (b. 1883) and his grandson Jimmy Corrigan (b. 1941). Yet, what exactly does this generation gap between a grandfather and his grandson imply? In many ways Ware suggests that Oedipal recognition is universal in the lives of young men. Nevertheless, Jimmy Reed Corrigan appears to be more affected by his mother's sexuality than most. He grows up under the shadow of his mother's death while his modern-day doppelganger, Jimmy Corrigan, grows up in the shadow of his father's absence. So why is it that a primarily paternal family

develops a more conflicting sense of sexuality in adolescent boys than a family rooted in matriarchy? Perhaps the difference results not from the biologically based notion of gender but the conception of the gender roles to which individuals subscribe and to which we are bound.

Ware's and Faulkner's sexual interpretation of their characters relies primarily on the effects of an absent, neglectful father and an overbearing, overwhelming maternal presence on male children. In both circumstances the neglectful father has too little an influence on the sexual development of the male figure whereas the mother has too demanding an influence, as is the case with Jimmy Corrigan and Darl Bundren. To some extent, the maternal influence overcompensates for the absent father, allowing the child to develop some semblance of familial continuity, which would explain Jimmy and Darl's stunted interaction with their environment.

Ware complicates this conjecture by his introduction of Jimmy Reed Corrigan because, in his case, the reverse is true. Jimmy Reed's absent mother and indifferent father results in greater gender/Oedipal confusion. During his Oedipal fantasies, Jimmy Reed aggressively desires to kill his father yet remains awkwardly inept when it comes to his sexual desire for women. Having never seen his mother in life, his focus is often on women's bodies. In one scene, Ware illustrates Jimmy's fantasy as a moment of subconscious Oedipal recognition and blossoming sexuality. After arguing with his father, Jimmy imagines killing him and running away to rescue a woman in distress along the way.

As he takes her to safety, he nervously unbuttons her blouse as beads of sweat form on his brow. This image hangs in the air when Jimmy reawakens to reality as the maid interrupts him masturbating.

Although Chris Ware's work is more explicit in his exhibition of the natural recognition of maternal sexuality in adolescent males than Faulkner's novel, neither author provides an alternative means of solidifying a fragmented (sexual) identity in a broken family that adequately answers the questions raised by the conception of gender in society. Jimmy Corrigan, Jimmy Reed Corrigan, Jewel Bundren, and Darl Bundren remain detached from both parents at the conclusion of each novel. Jimmy Corrigan's father dies before they can establish any kind of bond while his mother finds a new man with whom she eats Thanksgiving dinner. Jimmy Reed Corrigan's mother dies during childbirth and his father, overwhelmed by a responsibility he does not want, abandons his son at the World's Fair. As for the Bundren brothers, Anse replaces Addie with a "duck-shaped woman" (Faulkner 260)—the new Mrs. Bundren—only a few days after Addie's body is laid in the ground. The sense of isolation is overwhelming in both novels, indicating that those who are abandoned in one sense or another are influenced more by the absence of maternal and paternal structures than by their presence.

Thus, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* opens with a scene in which young Jimmy Corrigan is exposed to his mother's sexuality, placing him in an awkward position of son and suitor. Ms. Corrigan takes her son

to a car show, insisting that he meet her at three o'clock so that they can leave together. When he does not show up, she finds him waiting in line to receive Superman's autograph. Superman, the guest speaker at the car show, sees Jimmy's mother, and he asks the two of them to dinner while staring at her breasts, a subtle indication of what is to come later that night. They sleep together, and Jimmy watches Superman leave his mother's bedroom early in the morning. He gives Jimmy his mask, and asks the young boy to tell his mother that he had "a *real good time*" (Ware). Moments later, his mother emerges from her bedroom, buttoning up her shirt only to see Jimmy sitting at the kitchen table with her lover's mask over his eyes. Excitedly, Jimmy shouts, "**Mom!** He said to tell you he had a *real good time!*" (Ware).

It is important to note that during this opening sequence, the reader never sees Jimmy's mother's face, focusing the attention to her body rather than her identity outside of her gender. Also, the symbolism inherent in the superhero mask suggests that Jimmy's feelings are restrained behind an outside veneer. Because he is wearing the mask of his mother's lover, the feelings that Jimmy represses are those that vie for his mother's sexual attention. Having been the only significant male figure in her life, Jimmy must find ways of maintaining his status as the alpha male in his household. By putting on the superhero mask, Jimmy maintains the dominant male role by associating himself with the sexual male force he has not yet developed. In fact, Brad Prager agrees:

Ware uses superhero tropes to depict a gap between the ideal and the real—between

fantasized happy families (the utopian escapes that Freud referred to as ‘family romances’) and actual familial dysfunction. (200)

The “super” man in Ms. Corrigan’s life is juxtaposed to the heroic figure her son wants in a father, but behind the mask, the hero functions only as an extension of dysfunction in that he serves to exhibit the impossibility of Jimmy’s mother to be both sexual and maternal simultaneously. Essentially, the plot of Ware’s graphic novel is driven by “the presence and absence of his [Jimmy’s] father [and] sets the tone for its numerous Oedipal crises” (Prager 200). As a result, Jimmy’s daydreams often confuse the Oedipal sense of sexuality with a seemingly “normal” heterosexual identity. Jimmy’s attempt at performing a sexual act that would free him of any maternal or paternal influence is stunted by his repressed incestuous inclinations and veiled by the shadow of an absent father. Jimmy’s only understanding of affection comes from a dead woman and her womanizing widower; hence, his sexual fantasies fuse the love he wished he received from his parents with his sexual desire.

The next time the reader is privy to Jimmy Corrigan’s sexuality is after Jimmy meets his father for the first time. In the airport, there is a moment of recognition in which Ware portrays father and son next to one another dressed in the same clothes, drawn with the same potato-shaped head. Shortly after associating himself with his biological father, Jimmy then imagines watching his parents have sex. His mother’s face is turned away from Jimmy as

he looks in on his parents. Jimmy then imagines smashing a glass beer mug in his father’s face after which he continues to stab him to death with a stray shard of glass. The scene ends with Jimmy poised over his wailing father as if he were going to slit his throat, clearly exhibiting the requirements for an explicit Oedipal recognition.

Because the reader assumes Jimmy’s point of view, Ms. Corrigan is invariably facing away from the reader as well. In fact, the reader never obtains a clear view of Ms. Corrigan’s face throughout the entire work. Ware uses the motif of Ms. Corrigan’s veiled face to display the pivotal Oedipal recognition that occurs in Jimmy. Brad Prager explains the possible meaning of concealing Ms. Corrigan:

The ban on representing her [Ms. Corrigan] stems from an acknowledgement of Jimmy’s repression of his incestuous desires. Any depiction of her is taken to be profane, because it calls attention to the fact that she is indeed an object of desire. The wisps of hair [blocking her face] resemble a veil, which if it were pulled away, would reveal a face upon which Jimmy cannot gaze directly. In encountering her face he would be forced to confront his Oedipal wishes. (201)

Chris Ware uses Ms. Corrigan’s veiled face as a mechanism through which he critiques the image of the superhero in comics. Just as Ms. Corrigan’s hair acts as a barrier between Jimmy’s sexual conception of his mother and his maternal conception, the “super” man’s mask acts as a barrier between

the reality of Jimmy's absent father and the fantasy of what his father could be. Ware draws (both literally and figuratively) the parallel between the superhero and Jimmy Corrigan's intrusive visions of his mother as a sexual entity, indicating that both mechanisms, the superhero and the visions, are a form of escapism. But, as Prager points out, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* "alludes to the fact that [...] even the most private paths of escape are barred" (202) as Jimmy continually wrestles with the intrusion of his Oedipal recognition in his thoughts.

Daydreams in which a sexual recognition of maternity manifested under the presence of an absent parent occur in Jimmy Reed Corrigan's childhood as well. Though Jimmy Reed was raised without a mother, he still wrestles with his budding sexuality and the need to supplant his unwelcoming father. After listening to his father tell stories about the carnage of the Civil War, Jimmy Reed goes back to his room and imagines that he is a soldier in the war. Turning his fist into a gun, Jimmy Reed shoots the enemy who is depicted as his father, at which point he fantasizes about running away on his horse to build a new life and a home for himself. While out on horseback, Jimmy Reed rescues an abandoned girl, who serves only as an extension of his sexual drive. The fantasy ends as his maid enters the room, interrupting Jimmy Reed as he is masturbating. The fact that Jimmy Reed's daydream emerges from a desire to kill his father and evolves into one which focuses on sexual exploration creates a kind of Oedipal message skewed by his detached involvement with his parents. His desire to be loved by his parents is the

only kind of affection he knows; thus, his sexual drive confuses the physical need with a deeper emotional imbalance in which the love he yearns for from his parents is superimposed onto his physical desires.

The boy dreams of becoming a man first by supplanting his father and then by finding a woman who will be able to carry his seed, which is made possible by his horse, Minnie. Jimmy's fondness for Minnie embodies the idealized family unit about which he daydreams; thus, the horse becomes an instrument of his fantasy and replaces the idea of mother and father. Just as Jewel's horse serves to make Addie's death more manageable, Minnie also serves to displace Jimmy's perceived inadequacies into a fantasy in which those inadequacies dissolve. The horse allows him to deal with the missing matriarch on his own terms, having never learned behaviors like compassion or gentleness (two characteristics which are generally associated with the maternal) from his callous father. Women have been merely a function of William Corrigan's sexual drive, and having witnessed his father's sexual indiscretions, it is no surprise that Jimmy's fantasy is mixed with a fierce sexual drive and a slight, hesitating moment of guilt. He pauses before he undresses the girl in his fantasy, demonstrating the reluctance embedded in his Oedipal recognition.

Interestingly enough, Jimmy Reed Corrigan looks strikingly similar to the grown Jimmy Corrigan of the present time though one is clearly a small child and the other a grown man. One explanation for this depiction of Jimmy Corrigan as both a man and a child is evident in the author's

use of the Corrigan lineage to illustrate the constant presence of sexual anxiety in the protagonists' lives. The anxiety that Jimmy Corrigan and his grandfather feel stems from their inability to cope with the looming and overwhelming absence of parents. Prager asserts that Chris Ware "depicts how the experiences of the boy and the man are of one piece" (203) and that the "weight of childhood on Jimmy's psychic life renders the boy and the man virtually identical" (204). Ware manages to bridge the gap between generations of Corrigans by demonstrating the social limitations one acquires under the care of only one parent. Both Jimmys feel profound love for their absent parents and simultaneously hate them for their absence. Jimmy Reed Corrigan admits that he knows nothing about his mother and that he has no idea what he is missing (Ware). Jimmy Reed discusses his mother:

Whatever maternal notion I harbored was mostly a murky mishmash of multiple maids and typical sentimental mush. My imagination had even fabricated the most particular details of her death, although I had no idea what "childbirth" really entailed other than doctors and pans of water. But what cruel irony for a child to suffer—that my beginning was the cause of her end! I suppose I could've developed some sympathy for my father. After all, his solitude was clearly my fault. (Ware)

Jimmy Reed experiences the same feelings towards his mother as Darl Bundren expresses for Addie. Both want to be in her favor but have been denied her love. As a result, Darl and Jimmy Reed see themselves in the world in relation to their mothers. Because they cannot deal with the immense weight her absence brings, they are incapable of forming a secure identity rooted in autonomy. Hence, each suffers a cruel irony: the love that they have for an idealized maternal force will never be reciprocated, not even in the substitution (i.e. the new Mrs. Bundren or Jimmy Reed's father, William Corrigan).

In fact, some critics view William Faulkner as a modernist writer who focuses on "epistemological loss in which the experience of loss affects the construction of the self and the self's relation to others" (Raschke 100). If loss is the core sentiment behind this interpretation of modernist literature, we must ask ourselves the following question: what experience of loss affected the writer's sense of authorship during the modernist movement? Debrah Raschke cites the "cultural, political, and economic shifts in the late nineteenth century [which] threatened the very core on which many constituted their identities and their heritage" (102-3) as one explanation for modernist writers' existential crisis. Armed with the knowledge that the intended meaning in their works is limited to a lexicon of language which serves only as a barrier between the author and the reader, writers like William Faulkner responded to their changing environment and nebulous conception of self by creating works which reflected the uncertainty of a society

on the brink of change. The Bundren family's journey proves to be emblematic of the move towards fragmented individualism foreshadowed in Faulkner's era. Faulkner's generation could not visualize the future of America without seeing it in irrevocable fragments, leaving future generations of writers with the responsibility of finding a solution to the disintegration of family. And, if Faulkner's work is a prediction of what was to come for modern industrialist American society, Ware's graphic novel can be seen as a post-modern response to Faulkner's modernist text. However, the problems that Faulkner depicts in the Bundren family recur in the Corrigan lineage, indicating that the isolation of the individual persists. In fact, Ware is "committed to depicting the unhappy armor of everyday life and telling the impossible story of individual origins in the age of mechanical reproduction" (Prager 211).

Representing the dissolution of the family inherent in modern times, the Bundrens are constantly bound by their socio-economic status. As a rural Southern family during the Great Depression, the members of the Bundren family lack the potential for social mobility because they are chained by their financial limitations. The family unit will not adapt to the changing economy in America as seen by their fruitless journey to bury Addie. Instead, the family self-destructs. To Donald Kartiganer, the journey of the Bundren family is "about a break in expression, some failure of the imagination to reconcile form and vision, to create a shape that is not a stasis, change that is not chaos" (33). Each member's dissatisfaction and frustration with Addie's

death exacerbates his or her feelings of being completely isolated from the family unit and the environment, leading each to focus on immediate needs that can be satisfied. Thus, Anse takes a new wife, Jewel finds his horse, Dewey Dell seeks an abortion, and Vardaman displaces his grief on a fish. Each object that the family members associate with Addie represents a distancing away from the communal and an emphasis on the self. In turning inwards, the family fragments, thus abandoning the possibility of relying on each other to deal with grief and echoing the sense of epistemological loss defined in Raschke's conception of modernism. Darl articulates his descent into individualism when he asks:

How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls.
(Faulkner 207)

Darl's construction of self is defined by negation, especially by his parents' emotional absence. Addie's death proves that "man escapes from existence momentarily, only to have it echo back to him in his own obsessions, to recapitulate his furious and weary desires" (Petty 33-4), illustrating that Darl's fragmented identity is a dead gesture of its surroundings. Darl thinks in abstractions and, thus, thinks of himself in abstract terms. As a result, his identity is influenced by the absence of things, like his mother, rather than their presence. His mother's death, the love he never

receives, and Anse's apathy towards fatherhood—all of these absences have defined Darl. Combined with the changes in America during the Great Depression, Darl has nowhere to turn for validation, and, instead, he falls apart. His family places him in an institution by the time Addie is buried, suggesting that those who are unwilling to adapt to the changing American culture will ultimately self-destruct.

Additionally, the journey to bury Addie “builds a ceremony in the presence of nothingness” (Kartiganer 31), but it is not open to all members of the family. Notice that Darl, the main character to whom the reader relates, is not mentioned as having an object upon which he can displace his grief. This is because Darl “has no concrete sense of self that can become the bridge for his participation in it, no vein of self-interest for which he can find the appropriate physical formula” (Kartiganer 31). Never having connected emotionally to his parents, Darl does not know how to connect himself to anything at all. Neither his environment nor his relationships bridge his sense of isolation. In this sense, Faulkner may be using Darl to express the isolation involved in modernity. Faulkner's combined use of stream of consciousness and internal monologue allows the author to recreate the natural rhythm of thought and memory without explicitly using the voice of the narrator. Faulkner grants the reader access into Darl's mind, which allows him to understand the character better by identifying with Darl's isolated state. Faulkner creates “a consciousness that, in effect, makes one a solitary prisoner in a private dream world” (Raschke 111), accentuating elements of individualism and isolation

among the characters in the book but also between the reader and author. At this point, the modernist tone transcends the language in the novel and defines the relationship between reader and author. Richard Moreland sees Faulkner's writing style as one that “dramatizes the strain and repeated failure by received reason, nature and common sense to repress or at least grammatically to subordinate persistently outrageous horrors, stubborn doubts, endless qualifications” (21).

As mentioned previously, these horrors and doubts stem from a changing modern society in which the idea of technological progress led to the slaughter of thousands in World War I, and like all modernist writers, Faulkner fell subject to an ineffable sense of “the depressive, uncommunicative, atomized tendency of much modernist thought, as if that ‘something’ cannot be named or thought without the most wrenching dislocations and fragmentations” (Moreland 21). Essentially, Faulkner's writing stems from the belief that the state of flux under which the early twentieth century was shrouded becomes permanent in modernity, and he, like many others, must capitulate to uncertainty.

Chris Ware's graphic novel explores how his characters respond to the problems of modernity addressed by writers like Faulkner. How does a society function in an age of “mechanical reproduction” (Prager 195), and what happens when human interaction begins to mirror this mass-produced, industrialized society? Ware goes so far as to depict Jimmy Corrigan as a mechanical extension of modern society, drawing him as a robot with the head of a late nineteenth-century camera, which then can be cut out and

assembled by the reader, breaking all boundaries between the audience and the text. Brad Prager explains this metaphor best when he writes:

[Ware is] highly attuned to the fact that what one actually risks in the age of mechanical reproduction is that the self is itself merely a mechanical reproduction, like the photographic machines introduced in the nineteenth century. Jimmy, because of the mechanistic world of which he is a part, is fundamentally a steely assemblage—a claim to which Ware calls the reader's attention through providing cut-out kits with which readers can themselves construct the robot-Jimmy. (210)

Ware uses the past to emphasize the technological progression of the future, and in cutting out models of the robot Jimmy Corrigan, the reader participates in the mechanical reproduction that defines post-modern texts like Ware's comic. The use of both archaic machinery and modern technology allows Ware to blend the past and the present, reminding us that in our isolation we are intrinsically interconnected through technological evolution. Hence, it is in the past that Ware discovers the mechanical reproduction that will define the future.

Represented by the Chicago World's Fair, new technologies are imposed on the community in *Jimmy Corrigan*. Just as the larger-than-life statues on display are fettered to the ground by the pound of a mallet, the people

crowded in the buildings at the World's Fair are chained to the technological and economic changes that occur in their society. In fact, Ware links the promise of new technology to the disintegration of human relationships in the scene where William Corrigan abandons his son, Jimmy Reed, on top of the ornate World's Fair Building, foreshadowing the communal breakdown that accompanies technological progress. As the reader eventually realizes, this particular cell where in Jimmy Reed imagines his father casting him off the roof of the building is only one in a series of images that chronicle a continuing nightmare in which Jimmy Reed's fear of abandonment is equated with the act of murder.

Furthermore, the overwhelming sense of isolation that Jimmy Reed feels in the shadow of his father's (and mother's) absence is reflected in the next panel in which the World's Fair Building dwarfs the people below it. The immensity of the fair itself eclipses those who helped to build it, suggesting that the new technologies people create will similarly minimize our sense of community until all of us are, like Jimmy Reed, abandoned and isolated, waiting to be loved.

Notes

- 1 Anse chides Addie for not wanting to have any more children when they discuss plans to make a bigger family, saying “Nonsense [...] you and me aint nigh done chapping yet, with just two” (Faulkner 173).

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