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Mapping Unstable Selves: Existential Ontology and Narrative Multiplicity in *As I Lay Dying*

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Abstract: This article examines William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* through an integrated theoretical lens that reconceives focalization, stream of consciousness, and existential ontology as structurally interdependent mechanisms of narrative disintegration. Rejecting conventional thematic treatments, the study reframes these narrative techniques as philosophical agents that enact, rather than merely depict, the fragmentation of selfhood. Drawing on theories of narratology, the interiority models, and existential philosophy, the article argues that Faulkner's use of narrative multiplicity produces unstable and recursive subjectivities. Through close readings of the Bundrens' internal monologues, the article demonstrates how focalization destabilizes narrative authority, stream of consciousness dismantles cognitive coherence, and the novel's form itself generates an existential crisis. The findings suggest that *As I Lay Dying* is not only a modernist text concerned with identity, but a philosophical artifact in which form functions as an ontological event. This approach contributes to Faulkner studies, narratological theory, and literary existentialism by offering a new model for reading narrative as an epistemological site of being and its disassembly. The conclusion suggests that fiction not only reflects but generates new ontological and epistemic modes of thinking.

Keywords: Focalization; Interiority; Existential Ontology; Narrative Theory; Subjectivity.

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1. Introduction

This study offers a contribution to Faulkner scholarship by reframing *As I Lay Dying* through an epistemological lens that foregrounds the intersection of narrative multiplicity and existential ontology. Rather than rehearsing the well-trodden thematic triad of stream of consciousness, focalization, and existentialism, this article proposes an integrated methodological framework in which focalization operates not simply as a narrative function but as a medium of existential rupture. While Faulkner's polyphonic techniques have been widely discussed, the precise way in which shifts in focalization mediate the ontological instability of the self has remained critically undertheorized. In this respect, the study does not ask how Faulkner represents the self, but how the novel's formal instability generates a condition in which selfhood becomes a contingent, narratively-constructed response to absurdity. The research contends that *As I Lay Dying* is not merely a novel *about* existential crisis; it is one that *narrates* existential fragmentation through its very structure.

Methodologically, this article draws on Gérard Genette's narratological distinction between voice and mood, and reinterprets focalization as a philosophical device of subject dislocation. Rather than analyzing focalization as a static representational tool ("who sees?"), the study engages it as a recursive logic of ontological instability. Stream of consciousness, meanwhile, is approached not as a psychological technique, but as an epistemological expression of the dissonance between inner perception and external being. This approach aligns with Jean-Paul Sartre's claim that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 4), yet extends it by asking how narrative *form* makes and unmakes the self. The study integrates these elements to ask, not whether Faulkner's characters possess coherent identities, but whether coherence is ever narratively or philosophically possible within a modernist epistemology.

This research poses three interrelated questions: First, how does Faulkner's manipulation of focalization displace fixed identity and expose the instability of narrative authority? Second, in what ways does the novel's use of stream of consciousness articulate existential conditions that undermine phenomenological unity? And finally, how do these formal innovations serve to interrogate the very possibility of selfhood in the absence of ontological essence? The objective is not to reassert the thematic presence of existentialism in Faulkner's fiction, but to chart the process by which the narrative mode of the novel structurally performs existential dislocation. In doing so, the study contributes an innovative perspective to modernist criticism by arguing that narrative

technique in *As I Lay Dying* is itself a site of philosophical inquiry. The paper proceeds as follows: the next section will map the existing scholarship on narratology and existential thought in Faulkner studies; this will be followed by a theoretical discussion of focalization and epistemic fluidity; the core analytical sections will offer close readings of selected characters' narrative voices; the conclusion will return to the research questions and articulate the theoretical and literary implications of this study's findings.

2. Literature Review

The present literature review is structured to trace the evolution of critical inquiry into *As I Lay Dying* through three tightly interwoven conceptual strands: focalization, stream of consciousness, and existential ontology. This section identifies how these strands have been previously approached, often independently or in binary pairings, without attending to the epistemological tension their interplay produces. In line with the methodological scope outlined in the introduction, the review will highlight key scholarly contributions that inform the narrative, philosophical, and formalist terrain of the novel, while also underscoring a significant scholarly absence: a fully integrated analysis that reads narrative perspective as a structural expression of existential ontology. This gap defines the departure point of the current study.

Stream of consciousness as a narrative strategy has been foundational to interpretations of Faulkner's technique of writing. Robert Humphrey, in *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (1954), describes Faulkner's method as "an intricate interweaving of interior monologues that seeks to represent the fractured and disjointed nature of human thought" (84). Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay "On *As I Lay Dying*," sees the novel's polyphonic narration as a dramatization of "the absurdity of existence through the very disjunction of their voices" (139). Sartre's analysis of the Bundrens' interiority positions their thoughts as philosophical embodiments of existential detachment. Molly Hite, in *Ideas of Order in the Novels of William Faulkner*, argues that Faulkner's narrative fragmentation signals "unstable narrative subjectivity," where perspective becomes a contest between perceptual realities rather than an objective framework for truth (56). This view is expanded by Erwin Steinberg in *The Stream of Consciousness Technique in the Modern Novel* (1979), who emphasizes that Faulkner's method mirrors "the fluidity of human cognition," thus reinforcing the philosophical dimension of psychological incoherence (112).

The narratological mechanism of focalization, often overshadowed by voice and temporality, has also been examined, though not always with existential implications in mind. Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1972) supplies the theoretical language for distinguishing "who sees" from "who speaks," a distinction that has significantly

influenced narrative theory (186). Suzanne Ferguson, in her article “Faulkner’s Use of Focalization in *As I Lay Dying*,” underscores how Faulkner’s rotating focalizers fragment knowledge and destabilize narrative authority, suggesting that “truth in the novel is a matter of interior perception rather than external verification” (223). Patrick O’Donnell, in *Narrative Forms in the Modern American Novel*, adds that Faulkner’s use of multiple focal points “exposes the impossibility of a singular, unified self,” pointing to a deeper philosophical issue of ontological pluralism (167). Lisa Zunshine, in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), builds on this by arguing that Faulkner’s narrative multiplicity “foregrounds the cognitive limitations of characters and readers alike in apprehending coherent identity” (204).

More directly, Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist framework—particularly the dictum “existence precedes essence” (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 5)—has guided many philosophical readings of Faulkner. Robert M. Slabey, in “*As I Lay Dying* as an Existential Novel,” describes the Bundrens’ journey as an enactment of ontological uncertainty in which characters seek definition in a world that offers none. However, his reading treats existentialism thematically rather than structurally. Awfa H. Aldouri’s “Stream of Consciousness in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*” similarly addresses the psychological effects of stream of consciousness, but does not connect it with narrative structure as an existential expression. More integrative studies such as Zhang Cai Fang’s “On Focalization in *As I Lay Dying*” and Lillian LeCompte’s “Delving into the Mind of Faulkner’s Darl Bundren” do recognize the overlap between focalization, interior monologue, and existential motifs. Yet, these works remain limited in scope, examining how these concepts coexist rather than how they functionally construct selfhood under epistemological duress.

Philip Weinstein’s *Faulkner’s Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* offers one of the most compelling treatments of subjectivity in Faulkner, asserting that the author’s depiction of consciousness “resonates with Sartre’s insistence that selfhood is an ongoing project rather than a fixed state” (134). Similarly, Simon Critchley, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, draws attention to Faulkner’s engagement with “the instability of meaning and the perpetual deferral of identity” (178), aligning modernist narration with existential loss. Harold Bloom, in his edited volume *William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying* (1987), reinforces this reading, noting that “the struggle of the characters against narrative and metaphysical determinism represents a direct challenge to ontological fixity” (57).

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains. No study to date has fully examined how Faulkner's shifting focalizations operate not only as stylistic tools or thematic illustrations, but as epistemological engines that enact the existential crisis of fragmented being. In treating focalization as a narrative *function* rather than an ontological *gesture*, previous scholarship has either isolated the novel's narrative technique from its philosophical import or treated its philosophical dimension without sustained attention to form. The present study, by contrast, offers an integrated model in which focalization, stream of consciousness, and existential ontology are not merely co-present but structurally interdependent—producing a selfhood that is neither stable nor representational, but radically unstable and narratively generated.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the critical architecture of the present study, which aims to reconfigure the reading of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* through a triadic theoretical lens: focalization, stream of consciousness, and existential ontology. Rather than applying these theories descriptively, the research employs them as methodological instruments to uncover the structural production of narrative-based subjectivity under epistemic strain. The primary innovation of this framework lies in its reinterpretation of focalization as an existential device, one that does not merely organize perception but actively destabilizes ontological coherence. Stream of consciousness, likewise, is not approached as a psychological technique but as a codified narrative system that dramatizes the incoherence of interiority. Existentialist thought, particularly in its post-Sartrean reformulations, provides the philosophical contour that binds these narratological features to crises of being, perception, and identity. This composite methodology establishes the ground for analyzing the novel's narrative fragmentation as a performative enactment of existential instability.

The analysis begins with Gérard Genette's foundational narratology in *Narrative Discourse* (1972), specifically his distinction between "voice" (who speaks) and "focalization" (who sees) (186). Genette's formalist approach allows for identifying the narrator's position within or outside the story-world. However, this study diverges from Genette's static model by incorporating Mieke Bal's redefinition of focalization in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (4th ed., 2017). She asserts that focalization is not merely a spatial or visual alignment but a "discursive construction of subjectivity" (151) with ideological and ontological consequences. Bal further notes that focalization "functions as a formal embodiment of internal division" (152), a point crucial to understanding how Faulkner's narrative shifts do not only vary perspective but produce fractured, unfinalizable subject-positions. This shift from focalization as visual orientation to focalization as ontological instability is a core methodological intervention of the study.

To anchor this destabilization within a broader philosophical matrix, the research invokes existential ontology as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1945). Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" (*Being and Nothingness* 5) inaugurates a radical rethinking of identity as neither fixed nor discoverable, but continually deferred through action and narration. His claim that "consciousness is what it is not and is not what it is" (*Being and Nothingness* 86) illuminates the ontological rupture that underlies Faulkner's characters. Yet, this study intentionally extends beyond Sartre by integrating the ethical and discursive dimensions of identity theorized by Judith Butler and Simon Critchley. Butler's notion of subjectivity as "a site of ambivalent reiteration rather than original authorship" (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 8) offers a useful supplement to Sartrean freedom, emphasizing the performative failures of self-definition. Similarly, Critchley, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992), argues that existential narratives often "unravel meaning at the very moment they seek it" (178), a phenomenon clearly observable in the disjointed monologues of Faulkner's novel.

The concept of stream of consciousness also undergoes critical revision. While William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) offers the original formulation: "It is nothing jointed; it flows" (239); however, this study follows Monika Fludernik's reframing in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996). Fludernik insists that stream of consciousness should be understood not as mimetic realism but as a "culturally encoded strategy that signals interiority through textual markers" (50). This is crucial for interpreting Faulkner's formal devices, ellipses, temporal ruptures, and non-sequiturs; not as representations of mental flow but as narrative enactments of failed cognitive synthesis. Such failures do not merely express trauma or confusion; they rather perform ontological fragmentation that aligns with the existential void explored throughout the novel.

The notion of the "narrative self" is further complicated by recent work in cognitive philosophy and neuroscience. Daniel Dennett's theory of the self as a "center of narrative gravity" (*Consciousness Explained*, 1991) and Thomas Metzinger's "self-model theory of subjectivity" (*The Ego Tunnel*, 2009) both challenge the integrity of interior identity by arguing that the self is a function of recursive narrative modeling. Their post-phenomenological perspectives expose how consciousness and identity are produced through representational loops, always prone to distortion, interruption, and failure. In *As I Lay Dying*, such failures become formalized through the novel's overlapping interior monologues, each of which attempts but never achieves narrative self-coherence.

The study engages with recent existential and post-existential thought to update its philosophical vocabulary. Claire Colebrook's reflections on affective discontinuity and Ray Brassier's interrogation of nihilism serve as theoretical correctives to the humanist optimism that underpins classical existentialism. Brassier, in *Nihil Unbound* (2007), asserts that "the disenchantment of the world is not a cultural accomplishment but a consequence of the world's indifference" (3). This resonates with the novel's refusal to grant transcendence or coherence to its characters' struggles. Likewise, Rosi Braidotti's posthuman critique in *The Posthuman* (2013) reframes subjectivity as "a nomadic and dispersed material assemblage" (87), a formulation that renders the unified, autonomous self-untenable. These interventions help to situate Faulkner's narrative strategies within the wider frame of contemporary theory, where identity is no longer a site of existential choice but of ontological diffusion.

This theoretical framework thus enables a re-reading of *As I Lay Dying* in which narrative form and philosophical inquiry are inseparable. By reconstructing focalization as an existential apparatus, stream of consciousness as a narratological artifact of failed selfhood, and identity as a postponed and fractured construct, the study addresses the critical gap identified in previous literatures. The proposed model rejects interpretive synthesis in favor of epistemological fracture, reading Faulkner's formal disruptions as manifestations of a subjectivity that is not merely represented but fundamentally disassembled in the act of narration.

4. Analysis

This section presents a close, theory-driven analysis of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, structured around three interlocking conceptual pillars developed in the theoretical framework: focalization, stream of consciousness, and existential ontology. In line with the study's overarching objective, to rearticulate Faulkner's modernist narrative as an ontological performance rather than thematic representation, each subsection focuses on one of these key terms and demonstrates how Faulkner's formal techniques enact, rather than describe, the existential unmaking of selfhood. Regarding the conceptual promises mentioned, this discussion answers the research questions outlined in the introduction by examining how identity is constructed in Faulkner's novel through structural disintegration, perceptual instability, and ontological failure.

4.1. Focalization as Ontological Dislocation

Focalization in *As I Lay Dying* functions not simply as a narrative device but as a site of ontological fracture that exposes the instability of selfhood. Mieke Bal defines focalization as "the relation between the vision and that which is seen, between who perceives and what is perceived" (*Narratology* 146). She stresses that focalization

“configures how the subject is constituted and destabilized through discourse” (152). Faulkner’s novel radicalizes this dynamic: by dispersing focalization across fifteen narrators, he makes the act of seeing itself an existential crisis. Darl Bundren, the most frequent focalizer, becomes not the novel’s center but the locus of disintegration where perception and being collapse into one another. His voice exposes that perception is never neutral; it is an ontological event that unmakes the subject who speaks.

Darl’s self-description, “I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not” (*As I Lay Dying* 80), condenses the novel’s drama of being and nothingness. The statement reads less as psychological confusion than as a dramatization of Jean-Paul Sartre’s dictum that “man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 28). For Sartre, the human project is perpetual self-definition through choice; yet Darl’s consciousness, fragmented by competing narrative lenses, renders such a project impossible. His self-questioning translates Sartre’s abstraction into a concrete linguistic fracture: the pronoun “I” no longer guarantees presence. Faulkner transforms existential philosophy into narrative form, suggesting that the act of telling itself dismantles the illusion of a unified self.

Darl’s perception repeatedly misaligns with others, dislocating any stable narrative authority. When he observes, “Jewel’s eyes look like pieces of a broken plate, the blue pieces of a uniform that somebody has worn and washed, worn and washed” (65), the description fragments both object and observer. The image of “broken plate” mirrors the shattering of coherent identity. As Judith Butler explains, the subject is always vulnerable to dissolution in discourse: “The subject is constituted through a fundamental dependency on a discourse that can never fully capture or define it” (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 7). Darl’s language enacts precisely this dependency, his voice, far from expressing an interior truth, performs the unraveling of selfhood. Focalization thus becomes a process of discursive undoing rather than revelation.

This unraveling reaches its limit in Darl’s meditation on Addie’s corpse: “It’s not her because she is is now, and she was was then” (104). The doubling of verbs fractures temporal logic, forcing language to bear the weight of paradox. Sartre describes consciousness as “a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (*Being and Nothingness* 100). Darl’s syntax literalizes this paradox; his grammar stages the impossibility of coinciding with oneself in time. Addie’s being and by extension Darl’s being, become suspended between “is” and “was,” between presence and absence. Focalization here exposes that to speak of being is already to speak its undoing. The narrative form performs existential ontology rather than merely representing it.

Even the novel's apparently neutral opening: "Jewel and I come up from the field" (3), contains the germ of ontological instability. Within a few lines, Darl shifts from describing his shared movement with Jewel to imagining an external observer: "Anyone watching us from the cotton-house can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own" (3). The focalizer displaces himself from within the scene to outside it, dividing consciousness between participant and spectator. Bal notes that such shifts expose "the tension between the perceiving agent and the perceived world" (*Narratology* 148). Faulkner uses that tension to dissolve subject boundaries; Darl's "I" becomes both seer and seen, eroding the difference between perception and existence.

Through Darl's sections, Faulkner constructs what Cleanth Brooks called "a centrifuge of consciousness" where narrative voice and being whirl apart ("The Unity of Faulkner's Work" *Yale Review* 1952). The multiplicity of narrators amplifies this centrifugal pull, each consciousness refracting and contesting the others. No single perspective achieves mastery; instead, knowledge is dispersed and perpetually deferred. Focalization thus becomes an ontological rather than epistemological device: it reveals that identity is a function of relational vision. As critics such as Olga W. Vickery have observed, Faulkner's technique "forces the reader to construct coherence out of dissonance" (*The Novels of William Faulkner* Univ. of Louisiana Press, 1959 94). In that construction, the reader experiences the same instability that haunts Darl's mind.

As *I Lay Dying* thus turns focalization into an experiment in existential ontology. The fractured narrative voices do not merely diversify viewpoint; they dramatize the impossibility of a coherent self within modern consciousness. Darl's eventual madness is less pathology than structural truth: he becomes the figure through whom the text acknowledges that being is always mediated, always slipping into nothingness. Faulkner's polyphonic form thus enacts what Sartre, Butler, and Bal theorize; the subject as an unstable effect of discourse and perception. Focalization, far from organizing the novel's perspectives, exposes that to perceive is already to fragment the self.

4.2. *Stream of Consciousness and the Collapse of Interior Unity*

Faulkner's use of stream of consciousness in *As I Lay Dying* transforms a narrative method into an ontological drama. Rather than disclosing inner truth, consciousness itself becomes fragmented, estranged from any stable interiority. Monika Fludernik observes that stream of consciousness is not "a faithful mirroring of thought" but a "culturally structured representational device" that exposes the instability of modern subjectivity (*Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* 50). In Faulkner's novel, interior narration no longer implies unity; it dramatizes the impossibility of interior coherence. Each monologue is less a window into the mind than a textual site where consciousness folds back upon itself, losing the illusion of autonomy.

Vardaman's one-sentence chapter, "My mother is a fish" (Faulkner 84), condenses the novel's existential tension. Critics have often read the line as childish metaphor or trauma compression, but it functions instead as what Sartre might call an act of "bad faith," a desperate substitution of identity for being. The statement does not signify resemblance but collapse: the subject dissolves into predication. Language ceases to name and begins to absorb the speaker. As Fludernik writes, modernist interior monologue "foregrounds linguistic fragmentation as the very index of consciousness" (51). Vardaman's syntax thus becomes a pure event of disjunction, a moment when meaning fails and being disperses.

The fish image reappears when Vardaman tries to reconcile his mother's death: "Then it wasn't and she was, and now it is and she wasn't" (66). Temporal logic collapses into paradox. The line enacts the child's attempt to bind perception and loss through grammar, yet the grammar itself undoes the attempt. The oscillation between *was* and *is* turns language into a pendulum of ontological confusion. Rather than revealing inner continuity, the stream of consciousness here demonstrates the impossibility of sustaining time within thought. Faulkner stages what Paul Ricoeur would call "the aporetic experience of time" (*Time and Narrative* vol. 1 15), but stripped of any mediating narrative synthesis.

Darl's sections extend this crisis. "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel's mother is a horse" (Faulkner 95). The statement, often read as madness, is instead a radical assertion that relational identity has disintegrated. Daniel Dennett describes the self as a "center of narrative gravity," an abstract construct holding together experience through storytelling (*Consciousness Explained* 418). Darl's declaration shows that the center has vanished: familial, linguistic, and emotional coordinates collapse. His utterance is a performance of ontological dissociation, not mere metaphor. In Faulkner, the breakdown of syntax mirrors the breakdown of being.

The novel's polyphonic structure amplifies that collapse. Each consciousness appears isolated, circling around the same events yet failing to converge. As Ralph Ellison observed, Faulkner's technique "forces the reader to participate in the chaos of consciousness" ("Faulkner's World," *Shadow and Act* 1953 207). The reader must assemble coherence from incoherence, mirroring the characters' futile efforts. Stream of consciousness thus becomes both method and theme: it represents fragmentation and produces it in the act of reading. Interior monologue ceases to signify interior unity.

Addie Bundren's chapter offers the novel's most explicit critique of language. She claims, "Words are no good; that they don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (Faulkner 171). Later she adds, "Words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless" (171). Her perception of language's emptiness turns the technique of interior narration against itself. Ray Brassier describes such awareness as "the disenchantment of signification," a recognition that meaning no longer guarantees being (*Nihil Unbound* 27). Addie's voice enacts this disenchantment: the monologue becomes self-cancelling, a speech that denies speech. The result is not revelation but ontological void.

Addie's rejection of language also rewrites gendered subjectivity. As Judith Butler argues, the subject emerges only "through the reiteration of norms that can never fully contain it" (*Bodies That Matter* 94). Addie resists those norms by refusing linguistic mediation; her monologue exposes the violence of naming itself. When she insists that words never fit, she performs an existential withdrawal from symbolic order. Her silence after death is not absence but protest; an assertion that language's promise of unity is itself a lie. Faulkner gives the female dead a voice that erases the very conditions of voice.

Vardaman's and Darl's streams of consciousness mirror Addie's insight through failure. Their fragmented syntax dramatizes a world where perception cannot be reconciled with meaning. "My mother is a fish" thus resonates with "Words are no good": both collapse mediation. The child's literalization and the mother's negation express the same truth—that consciousness, when pushed to its limits, ceases to be representational. In Fludernik's terms, such moments signal "the linguistic surface as a thematic symptom of cognitive breakdown" (52). Stream of consciousness becomes stream without shore.

Darl's later sections heighten the centrifugal force of thought. His perception of Jewel's horse slides from observation to absorption where boundaries between mind and object blur: "the horse snorts and trembles, its eyes rolling wild white in the moonlight" (Faulkner 120). Consciousness becomes an external landscape rather than an interior domain. The technique aligns with what phenomenology calls the "intentional arc" of perception (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 137): the self extends into the world it perceives. Yet Faulkner reverses the arc, perception consumes selfhood. Darl's eventual institutionalization literalizes this collapse of interior unity.

From an epistemological perspective, Faulkner's stream of consciousness refuses the Cartesian equation of thinking with being. The novel shows that thought does not ground existence; it dissolves it. Addie's claim that words are harmless parallels Brassier's nihilist assertion that "thought's ultimate vocation is to think the extinction of meaning" (*Nihil Unbound* 11). The Bundrens' interior monologues enact that extinction. Language continues to speak, but no subject remains to claim it. The consciousness we encounter is spectral, a residue of grammar after the death of coherence.

This stylistic experiment also marks a philosophical shift. The collapse of interior unity transforms the self from essence into event. Each monologue is a temporal flare, a momentary configuration of language that immediately disperses. In this sense Faulkner anticipates later poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity. As Roland Barthes wrote, “The author is dead; writing begins” (*Image Music Text* 145). Faulkner’s interior voices confirm this death within fiction: the speaking subject disintegrates as soon as it speaks. Stream of consciousness becomes a theater of ontological disappearance.

Through these techniques, Faulkner constructs a modernist ethics of perception. To read *As I Lay Dying* is to witness the failure of coherence that defines human being. The novel refuses consolation, offering instead what Sartre called the “anguish of freedom,” the recognition that meaning must be invented yet never holds (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 34). Each consciousness struggles to narrate itself into existence, and each of them fails. Stream of consciousness becomes the medium of this collective failure, the textual symptom of existential freedom’s terror.

Faulkner’s stream of consciousness is not introspective realism but a philosophical experiment. By allowing voices to collide without synthesis, he exposes the modern subject as a linguistic fiction. The Bundrens’ scattered monologues compose an anatomy of disintegration in which thought and language collapse together. Through Fludernik’s narratology, Dennett’s cognitive model, Brassier’s nihilism, and Sartre’s existential ontology, we see Faulkner’s technique as both narrative innovation and metaphysical critique—the undoing of interior unity at the level of style itself.

4.3. Existential Disintegration and the Failure of Selfhood

The Bundren family functions as Faulkner’s laboratory for exploring the existential failure of selfhood. Each member embodies what Jean-Paul Sartre calls the “incomplete, contradictory, and self-displacing mode of being” (*Being and Nothingness* 86). In *As I Lay Dying*, identity is never achieved; it is only attempted and perpetually deferred. Faulkner transforms what might appear as psychological portraits into ontological case studies. His characters do not express self-knowledge but dramatize its impossibility. The Bundrens enact, each in a distinct register, the dissolution of the coherent subject that modernism inherits from nineteenth-century realism.

Jewel Bundren’s being is defined through motion rather than reflection. When Darl observes, “He is just one big motion” (Faulkner 96), Jewel’s silence becomes the form of his existence. His gestures substitute for speech; he rescues Addie’s coffin by plunging into the river without a word. Patrick O’Donnell interprets such actions as “performative manifestations of being where language ceases to hold referential power” (*Narrative*

Forms in the Modern American Novel 168). Jewel's kinetic existence resists linguistic containment: his identity emerges only in movement, then vanishes once the action ceases. Yet Cora's misunderstanding of him, her insistence on interpreting his labor as sin or pride, reveals the social misreading that accompanies ontological solitude. Jewel's self is pure act without witness, a being whose authenticity cannot be recognized within language.

The failure of communication that isolates Jewel becomes more profound in Dewey Dell's narration. Her confession, "I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth" (Faulkner 64), expresses not emotion but ontological paralysis. The metaphor abolishes human scale; she imagines herself as matter absorbed by indifferent nature. Judith Butler's concept of opacity clarifies this: "The subject's emergence is always entangled in what cannot be told" (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 34). Dewey Dell's voice exemplifies this entanglement—her gendered marginalization and social vulnerability are rendered in language that collapses into muteness. The interior monologue becomes a performance of exclusion. Her words name the impossibility of narrating the female self within patriarchal discourse, an ontological opacity that cannot be translated into coherent story.

Darl's progressive disintegration completes Faulkner's anatomy of failure. His final chapter, a torrent of "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes" (Faulkner 254), replaces consciousness with rhythm. Meaning implodes into repetition. Sartre's description of "nausea" as the recognition that "existence is without justification" (*Nausea* 178) finds its formal echo here. Darl's language no longer signifies; it merely persists as sound after the self has collapsed. This breakdown of syntax signals the ultimate consequence of radical reflexivity: when thought turns entirely upon itself, it erases its own ground. Darl's institutionalization at the novel's close is not a punishment but the logical terminus of his awareness. Madness becomes the narrative form of ontological lucidity.

Cash Bundren provides the novel's counterpoint. His voice seeks stability through craft and proportion. "It's because it won't balance. If they wanted it to tote and ride on a balance, they would have made it to balance" (Faulkner 96). For Cash, the world's truth is geometric; his carpentry imposes order where meaning has decayed. Simon Critchley writes that "ethics begins in response to the meaninglessness of the world, and it is in that response that responsibility lies" (*The Ethics of Deconstruction* 142). Cash's devotion to structure is precisely such an ethical response: a refusal to succumb to absurdity. His meticulous listing of reasons for beveling the coffin boards re-enacts the human need to construct symmetry in a universe that provides none.

Yet Cash's apparent rationality cannot secure ontological coherence. His numbered sentences fracture under the weight of experience, turning his reason into ritual. The list he recites betrays the desperation of logic to fend off chaos: "1. Because the shape of a coffin is a matter of balance..." (Faulkner 95). Each record is a safeguard against dissolution. In Sartrean terms, Cash attempts to transform facticity into essence; his craft is an act of self-making. But as *Being and Nothingness* insists, consciousness can never coincide with itself, it is "a being which is what it is not" (86). Cash's precision becomes its opposite: a revelation of futility. His structure exists only to mark the impossibility of closure.

The Bundrens collectively illustrate Faulkner's vision of existential disintegration. Jewel's silence, Dewey Dell's opacity, Darl's fragmentation, and Cash's rationalism are variations on a single theme: the impossibility of a unified self. Their interactions expose what Sartre calls the "useless passion" of consciousness—the perpetual striving to become complete in a world that denies completion (*Being and Nothingness* 615). Faulkner's polyphony embodies this philosophy formally. Each voice aspires to coherence yet collapses into contradiction, and the novel's structure mirrors this collapse through its refusal of synthesis. The family's journey toward Jefferson is less a pilgrimage than an enactment of being's dispersion across language, gesture, and silence.

Faulkner's existential humanism emerges precisely through these failures. The Bundrens' disintegration does not nullify meaning; it exposes the condition of meaning-making itself. Sartre's dictum that "existence precedes essence" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 22) is dramatized in their every act. Identity in *As I Lay Dying* is performative and contingent, constituted through choices that immediately dissolve. In presenting consciousness as process rather than substance, Faulkner anticipates later philosophical explorations of the self as relational and unstable. His novel transforms the Southern journey into a phenomenology of disintegration, where to exist is to fail at being whole; and in that failure, to reveal the truth of being human.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *As I Lay Dying* not only represents existential concerns thematically but formally enacts ontological instability through its integration of focalization, stream of consciousness, and existential ontology. Addressing the research questions posed in the introduction, the paper has shown that,

1. Faulkner's use of fragmented focalization dismantles narrative authority

2. The stream of consciousness operates not as mimetic representation but as a performative collapse of interiority, and that the characters' subjectivities are rendered as processes of existential disintegration rather than coherent selves.
3. Faulkner's novel performs rather than narrates the crisis of being. In a broader context, this research offers a methodological model for reading literary form as an epistemological event and underscores the capacity of modernist fiction to function as a philosophical medium.

By advancing a reading in which narrative structure itself enacts existential instability, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in narratology, existential literary theory, and modernist aesthetics, suggesting that fiction not only reflects but generates new ontological and epistemic modes of thinking.

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