Olga Vickery’s reading of *As I Lay Dying* which stresses the importance of the word / deed distinction, remains the essential point of departure for critical discussion. Yet it fails to account for certain crucial elements of the text because it overlooks an important aspect of this very distinction. Vickery’s interpretation rests on an opposition between those characters who exhibit a belief in the value of words only—the hypocrite Anse, the pious Cora, and the hypocritical and pious Whitfield—and those who believe in the efficacy of deeds alone—Cash, Jewel, and, above all, Addie herself. It is in relation to the latter character that her reading is weakest.

Certainly Vickery is convincing in her demonstration that Addie’s hunger for intensity of experience and for self-definition is related to this idea of the unreality of language in contrast to the reality of action. For Addie sees language as a barrier which prevents her from going beyond the commonplace and deceptions of the ordinary world and its conventions to strike through to something more profound and satisfying beneath the level of language and the ordinary human intercourse to which it restricts her. However, Vickery is only partly convincing when she presents Addie as embarking on the affair with Whitfield with the motive of exploring the word versus act distinction, and when she further suggests that what Addie learns from the experience is that while as a word sin leads to damnation, as an act it may lead to salvation. Vickery appears to mean salvation in a sense close to the conventional Christian meaning, for she goes on to say that Addie’s adultery “thus becomes a moral act, not, of course, in the sense of

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'good' or 'virtuous,' but in the sense that it re-establishes the reality of moral conduct and of the relationship between God and man" (p. 54). And Vickery concludes: "Through sin Addie seeks to find and enact her own humanity, and if her solution seems extreme, so is her provocation."

The present article offers an interpretation of the significance of Addie's adultery which is very different from that of Vickery, although it rests on an extension of the word versus deed distinction. It also offers a way of relating Addie's story to that of the novel's other central character, Darl, in a manner that illuminates both of them.

I have argued on another occasion that to see Darl, as commentators have done, as actually clairvoyant and as insane in any straightforward sense is to misread the novel. Yet this is an understandable mistake until we perceive the significance of the fact that these two apparent attributes are actually interdependent. The link between them is Faulkner's emphasis on the fact that Darl's vision of human realities is totally deterministic and that this sets him apart from his fellows. There is an important irony in this, for the dominant ethos of his Southern Baptist society is Calvinist and therefore might be expected to be similarly deterministic; but with a single exception which is crucial for my present purposes, this is the reverse of the case. For while the people around him pay lip-service to the idea of predestination—the inexorability and imponderability of the workings of Providence—their view of the operation of destiny is actually anthropomorphizing and trivializing. Darl on the other hand, while very far from their ostentatious piety, accepts predestination and its implications completely. He therefore sees the belief of his family and neighbors in freedom of will as an absurd delusion. It is this that makes him seem insane; but whether he is so is deliberately ambiguous, for one of Faulkner's intentions is to put in play the question of whether such an outlook is more or less sane than the conventional one.

Moreover, Darl has no supernatural powers: his apparent clairvoyance derives from the fact that his overwhelming sense of how

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the past determines the future allows him to predict very accurately
the behavior of his family. The final irony is that when, in order to
halt the grim funeral journey, he attempts to burn down the barn in
which his mother’s corpse lies, he is undertaking an initiative
which he must know is doomed. The result has tragic conse-
quences for him, for the other members of his family have him
committed to an asylum and their rejection of him loosens his
tenuous hold on his identity and so tips him into “madness”.

In the present article I go on to relate the area of the novel
centered on Darl to that centered on Addie by arguing that there is
an implicit but very important imaginative tension between Ad-
die’s long-past adultery with Whitfield and Darl’s burning down of
the barn. There is first a causal connection, for Addie’s act and the
state of mind responsible for it have initiated a series of conse-
quences whose effects are seen in the journey of the novel’s time-
present: the nature of Darl’s personality arising from his mother’s
rejection of him, the secret paternity of Jewel, the enmity between
the brothers as well as other members of the family, Addie’s
revenge against Anse through the promise she obtains from him to
bury her in Jefferson, and the funeral journey itself. This relentless
cycle of cause and effect is completed by Darl’s firing of the barn
which is the climactic event of the journey, and in his committal
which is the result of that act.

Even more important, there is a connection between the philo-
sophical outlook which led Addie to commit her desperate act and
that which leads Darl to his. For as we will see, Addie is the single
exception to the rule that all the characters apart from Darl merely
pay lip-service to the idea of predestination. Both mother and son
see the course of events as rigidly preordained by the pressure of
the past and as taking place without the intervention of a benevo-
 lent or even an interested deity. Therefore, in contrast to most of
the novel’s characters, neither interprets to his or her own satisfac-
tion, or even comments on, the workings of destiny. The reasons
for and consequences of this fundamental similarity between Darl’s
and Addie’s outlook have important implications for an under-
standing of the novel. For my argument is that Faulkner is
establishing a crucial distinction between real and pretended belief
in the predestined nature of Providence or the Word of God—and
that last phrase anticipates the way I intend to modify Vickery's thesis.

Furthermore, Darl and Addie both share an obsession with the inevitability and finality of death. This obsession derives from their conviction of predestination, which leads them to see death not as distinct from life but as pervading it and therefore in a sense defining and creating it. Darl's monologues are dominated by images related to death which he sees as preordained and therefore effectively already present within life. For not to be free to exercise choice is to be dead, and since one cannot choose not to die, one is in a sense already dead. For Addie death is similarly omnipresent, but in her case this is because it is associated with the passive surrender to destiny which she denounces in the people around her.

Here lies the crucial difference in temperament and outlook between Darl and Addie: while he fatalistically accepts this bleakly deterministic and death-haunted view of human existence, she passionately rages against it. And this difference is revealed in the quite distinct nature of the threat that each feels to his or her identity. For both of them the threat arises from their overpowering sense of predestination, for if free will and therefore the exercise of choice are illusory, then the self, which is based on the potential for choice, does not really exist.

The difference between them is clear from Darl's meditation on the precariousness of his hold on his identity beginning: "I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not" (12:76). Darl's sense of his own identity is dependent on other people, and requires that they should both exist and believe that he exists. His reverie ends with a cautious statement of his own existence based on the certainty of the existence of others, starting, presumably, with the member of the family who is least vexed by such doubts: "And Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be." After his rejection by his family, even this degree of certainty is denied

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3 In references to the text the number of the monologue and the page number are given at the first citation, preceded by the name of the monologist only when this is not clear from the context; quotations from As I Lay Dying are from the photographic reprint by Vintage Books of James B. Meriwether's corrected edition (New York: Random House, 1964), which is based on a collation of the first edition and Faulkner's original manuscript and typescript.
to him, and in his final monologue he therefore speaks of himself in
the third person.

On the other hand, Addie never doubts that she exists, but she is
possessed by the need both to assert her reality and to satisfy her
urge to make an impression before the oblivion of death by making
contact with the separate, mysterious otherness of other people. So
she begins her monologue by describing her desperate search for a
means to pierce through the superficialities and conventions of
human intercourse so that she might achieve direct experience of
something outside herself. But she is betrayed by the power of
predestination which, determining the course of events without
reference to the individual human will, deprives her of freedom of
choice and therefore—since identity depends on the exercise of
choice—of a sense of her own individuality. Working through the
deadening influence of the past, of conventions, and of language,
fate nullifies those people around Addie who passively yield to its
power. Addie accepts Darl's grim logic outlined above by which
life becomes no more than an effect of death. But unlike Darl she
refuses to accept the implications of this.

So Addie's monologue starts as a cry of desperate anguish born of
a hopeless and frustrated hunger that, continually deceived and
cheated, has embittered and enraged her. As her monologue makes
clear, Addie accepts a perverted version of the Calvinist ethos
which is carried to its bleak extreme and stripped of faith in any of
its more positive elements such as the mercy and love of God, or
eternal life. She retains belief only in the inescapability of sin and
death, and, above all, in the paramount importance of judgment
after death and the comparative unimportance of this world. In
connection with the latter belief Addie twice mentions a saying of
her father which is significantly ambiguous: "my father used to say
that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time"
(40:161). On the first occasion, Addie interprets this as a statement
of the insignificance of life on earth, but her passionate hunger for
reality leads her to reject this conventional piety, and since she has
no belief in life after death, her father's remark is for her a
statement of the absolute pointlessness of life. She therefore goes
on to say that when she reflected that her life as a schoolteacher
"seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would
hate my father for having ever planted me” (p. 162). However, when she repeats the remark at the end of her monologue, as we will find, she interprets it very differently.

Now we can begin to consider Addie’s adultery with Whitfield—the central event of her monologue and of her life, and an action whose repercussions are still affecting the Bundren family at the time of her death. The essential point is to see the thematic link between Addie’s motives and Darl’s state of mind. I have argued, as indicated above, that Darl’s supposed clairvoyance in fact derives from his profound conviction that predestination makes untenable a belief in free will and that, seeing through this illusion, he can guess the future with a high degree of accuracy. The conviction is shared by his mother, and this is the explanation of her motives in undertaking the adulterous affair with Whitfield.

It is in relation to Addie’s reasons for this action that the interpretation offered here most clearly differs from that put forward by Vickery. For I hope to show that Addie’s motive is not to re-establish a relationship with God of even the limited kind which Vickery describes, for God has, for Addie, no personal or moral attributes as far as we are shown in her monologue. On the contrary, her motive is to challenge the impersonal power of Providence that in her eyes the deity is, and so to sever herself from it.

As Vickery shows, Addie rejects the word in the sense of language which she sees as insulating her from reality. But I wish to argue that it is at least as important to see that she also rejects the Word, and that a further distinction is present in the novel between belief in mere words and belief in the Word. In a text whose exploitation of the resources of language is as rich as As I Lay Dying even a capital letter may carry a considerable weight of significance. The Word is Providence or the will of God in the sense in which Whitfield uses the term when he imagines God telling him that in committing adultery with Addie he has “outraged My Word” (41:169). And in the Calvinist terms in which the novel presents the issue, the distinction is between acceptance and non-acceptance of the doctrine of predestination.

In this context, Darl and Addie are together in contradistinction to the other characters in the novel, though there is a crucial
difference between them. For although both of them see predestination as robbing human beings of freedom of will, Darl accepts this as inevitable while Addie struggles against it. Her adultery, I will argue, is therefore a blasphemous and defiant action by which she seeks to thwart Providence and thereby assert her freedom and individuality. Addie is making a desperate attempt to escape from the pressures which mold human beings, reducing them to the predictable dolls or puppets of Darl’s fatalistic vision. Therefore she describes the liaison with the preacher not as a passionate love affair but instead as an abstract symbolic gesture. The act of sex for Addie is significant only as an outward symbol of the blasphemous nature of her adultery with a man of God: “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” (40:167). In my reading, this is the climactic sentence for it draws together a number of threads that run through the novel and are conveyed by a series of key terms brought together here: shape, blood, echo, death, and word. These concepts form a complex of ideas associated with the theme of determinism and the opposite reactions to it of Darl and Addie, and it is by tracing these threads back through the text and up to this point that we will come to understand the full meaning of Addie’s act.

The language of the novel, which, of course, is that of the Bundrens and their fellows, has an almost Shakespearean quality that requires and rewards close attention. This quality is due partly to the fact that it draws heavily on the diction and imagery of the King James Bible and partly to the archaic forms of the dialect. Language is employed so self-consciously in the novel that if we find a particular word used frequently and in an unusual way, then we may assume that it is pointing towards something important. And so it turns out to be in the case of the word “shape” which is the most important of the key concepts just referred to. As Faulkner employs it in the text it necessarily recalls at least two literary contexts. One is Hamlet’s remark that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hewn them how we will” (Hamlet 5.2.). The other is the King James Bible’s version of a psalm which expresses an almost Calvinist sense of the absolute sinfulness of man and his utter reliance on divine grace. This sentiment is
summed up in the verse in which the word occurs: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5).

In its occurrences in the novel, just as in the play and the psalm, the word is associated with predestination and is employed to refer either positively to the power of fate (that "shapes our ends") or negatively to man's susceptibility to this power (by which we are "shapen"). Significantly, apart from Peabody, Dewey Dell, Tull, Cash, and Vardaman, each of whom uses the word once only, the two characters who employ it most frequently are Addie and Darl—the two most concerned with predestination and death. Faulkner employs the word both as a verb and as a noun, and it is important to see how the positive and negative senses are distributed. Used as a noun the word has a necessarily negative sense: a "shape" is that which has been created. As a verb it is used both actively and passively and with both human and non-human agents, but of all these possible permutations the one which occurs least often is its use in the active mood with a human agent. In other words, normally someone or something is shaped or something shapes someone or something else, but only twice does someone shape something. The effect of this is to associate the human dimension with the negative implications of the word, and therefore to highlight the single important exception to this.

Faulkner creates a series of images based on the word "shape" and conveying the idea of Providence as an external force which acts on the passive human world to drain it of both solidity and meaning. To be shaped by outside pressures in this way, it is made clear, is to be robbed of freedom of will and infected with death. Peabody, whose common sense and detachment give an almost authorial status to his views, uses the word in this context. Reflecting on the long time Addie is taking to die, he remarks to himself: "That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image" (11:43–44). (In this and the following examples the italics are added.)

In the novel, the factors that are shown to determine human fate are those described in Peabody's words—history, geography, cli-
mate, and the obedience to convention which Faulkner himself once remarked was to blame for forcing the Bundren family to carry out the dead mother’s wish to be buried among her own people. Similarly, when Darl looks across the swollen ford as the dangerous crossing is about to be attempted, he has an acute insight into the predestined nature of the event. He sees the non-linear nature of time “no longer running straight before us in a diminishing line” and realizes the consequent inevitability of a future which in a sense already exists (34:139). Significantly, after this revelation, he goes on to employ the word “shape” in a sense close to Peabody’s when he imagines the team of mules, destined to be drowned during the crossing, as having more insight than the men into the illusory nature of free will. The mules look to Darl as if they are expressing a fatalistic despair “as though they had already seen in the thick water the shape of the disaster which they could not speak and we could not see.”

Dewey Dell employs the word “shape” in a monologue in which she too expresses her obsession with the inexorability of fate. The word occurs in a striking sentence which brings together vividly the ideas of death and hollowness: “The dead air shapes the dead earth in the dead darkness, further away than seeing shapes the dead earth” (14:61). In this Darl-like vision, the earth loses its solidity to become a mere outline defined by the pressure of the atmosphere or the metaphorical pressure of human perception—as if an image were an echo of an emission from the eye which is reflected back from a surface. Similarly, when the word “shape” is used as a noun in the novel, it frequently has the meaning of an empty form or an outline rather than a palpable reality. It denotes, that is to say, the limits defined by outside pressure and not a presence asserting itself. Meditating on the deadness and unreality of her relations with her husband and children, Addie uses the word in this sense, and her point is illustrated typographically by a space in the text: “The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a ” (40:165). Suggestively, both Addie’s conviction of the inadequacy of language and her frustrated

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4Faulkner in the University, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 112.
sexuality as a woman and a mother are represented by the absence of a word.

It is in Darl’s monologues that the idea of human existence as negatively defined by outside forces is most clearly stated, for the imagery of his vision reduces the people around him to inanimate patterns of light and darkness, of colors and textures. He habitually describes the members of his family in highly schematized terms that rob them of substance and life, reducing them to one-dimensionality. So he describes Jewel and his horse as “figures carved for a tableau savage” (3:12); the face of his dead mother is “like a casting of fading bronze” (12:50); his father’s face looks as if it is “carved by a savage caricaturist” (17:73–74); his family are “dolls” (46:197); and Jewel, running to save Addie’s coffin from the burning barn, looks like “a flat figure cut leanly from tin” (50:208). Darl sees people not as solid forms but as mere outlines, and hence the frequent references throughout his monologues to silhouettes, profiles, shadows, and reflections.

Darl’s use of the word “shape” is, therefore, particularly suggestive. Nearly all the contexts in which he employs it involve death, for it is death above all else that Darl sees as a force dominating and interpenetrating human existence. He describes how Cash, making Addie’s coffin, indicates to her through the window the outline of her coffin at the precise moment of her death by “shaping with his empty hand in pantomime the finished box” (12:47). (This bleak instance is the other of the two occasions on which a human agent employs the active form of the verb.) Later Darl describes Jewel passionately seizing the loaded coffin and carrying it to the wagon almost single-handed, so that it seems to “slip down the air like a sled upon invisible snow, smoothly evacuating atmosphere in which the sense of it is still shaped” (23:92). The image of the coffin appearing to leave a hollow space imprinted behind it suggests the negative power of the past which Addie represents. The same idea is conveyed by Darl’s description of the road through Tull’s cleared timber as defined by an absence: “shaped vaguely high in air by the position of the lopped and felled trees” (34:136). During Darl’s meditation on the uncertainty of his own identity he associates with his dying mother the load of wood on the wagon standing in the rain outside. Both of them are suspend-
ed between opposite states: seller and buyer, life and death. Darl reflects: "I can hear the rain *shaping* the wagon [. . .] only the wind and the rain *shape* it [i.e., the wood] only to Jewel and me" (17:76). After the crossing of the ford it seems to Darl that "Dewey Dell's wet dress *shapes* for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrousities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth" (37:156). His father and brothers are blind in the sense that they cannot see the absurdity of risking their lives and property in order to complete the journey, while the girl's enlarged breasts are ludicrous presumably because they remind Darl of the pregnancy which he alone of the family knows she is trying to abort.

Addie uses the word "shape" eight times in her single monologue and, with the exception of the sentence already quoted, always employs it as a noun. She uses the word in association with the two ideas already shown to be connected with it: passiveness and death. For Addie, the passive acceptance of destiny is a kind of living death in which one is robbed of the essential freedom of choice. It is above all language which seems to her to be associated with this deprivation, and so she refers to words as mere shapes—hollow spaces around which reality presses, instead of forms which positively assert themselves: "I knew that that word [i.e., "love"] was like the others: just a *shape* to fill a lack" (40:164). Addie's view of Anse, for whom language is the only reality, shows the inter-connectededness for her of the concepts language, deathliness, passiveness, and emptiness: "And then he died. He did not know he was dead." Anse is "dead" for Addie in the sense that he lives only in words. So she describes how, subjectively, she reduced him to nothingness by thinking of his name as "a *shape*, a vessel" into which she imagined him to be absorbed as if poured into a jar: "a significant *shape* profoundly without life like an empty door frame." And then, she concludes with laconic dismissiveness, "I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar."

The central opposition that runs through the novel is summed up in Addie's words drawing a distinction between herself and Anse: "I would be I; I would let him be the *shape* and echo of his word." While Addie is searching desperately for self-definition, Anse passively accepts his negative identity as merely "the *shape*
and echo" of something that is already empty and dead. The correlation of shape and echo here is highly significant: an echo is a sound reflected off a surface, and throughout the novel, as has been shown, the word "shape" is frequently used to mean the visual equivalent of this. In the light of Addie's and Darl's obsessive awareness of predestination, of the way in which providential forces act on passive human beings to deprive them of free-will and implicate them in their inevitable death, this vision of the physical world as reduced to hollow shapes by external pressures even as intangible as sight and sound, is an image of a reality so invaded by the omnipresent forces of predestination as to be robbed of substantiality.

Yet for Addie, unlike Darl, there exists an area of reality which she feels to be invulnerable to the forces of death and predestination. Addie uses the word "blood" to suggest this mysterious reality to which she feels that she owes a duty. The word first occurs when she describes how she thought of herself, when she was a schoolteacher, as fated to waste her life on her pupils without ever making an impression on them: "each with his and her secret and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine." Here the word suggests the incommunicable individuality within each person. So Addie used to beat her pupils in order to be able to say: "Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever."

After the birth of Cash and Darl, Addie describes herself as "hearing the land that was now of my blood and flesh." (And this last phrase might remind us of another set of associations discussed below.) That Addie feels that the act of giving birth has linked her to the land in a way which obliges her to act in defiance of Providence in order to make an assertion of her individuality, and that it is partly this perverse sense of duty that leads her to commit adultery with Whitfield, are implied by her otherwise mysterious words: "I believed that the reason was the duty to the alive, to the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land."

However, there is more to it than this, and having explored the associations of the key words in what I have called the crucial sentence of the novel, we are now in a position to see the full
significance of Addie’s account of how she and Whitfield “coerce[d] the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air.” Addie is doing much more than, in terms of Vickery’s distinction between the word and the deed, merely assert herself by an act in contrast to the evasions of language: she is expressing her contempt for the Word in the sense of the Logos or Providence which is being defied by her adultery.

What most clearly lays bare Addie’s motives is the single example in her monologue of the word “shape” used as a verb, which, as we have seen, is one of only two examples in the novel of a human being as the agent of that verb: “I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood.” Her use of the word “shape” makes it clear that Addie is here taking responsibility for her own destiny rather than being passively shaped by it as the other characters in the novel are content to be. And she is asserting herself through an act of defiant rebellion against Providence by perpetrating what is, within the terms of her own religious beliefs, the most appalling sin imaginable. Not merely is she committing adultery, but she is doing so with a man of God whom she, as the stronger character, has clearly seduced. And so she reflects that “the sin [was] the more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained by God.” Moreover, the affair is, as will become apparent below, a blasphemous parody of the Incarnation. Since Christian doctrine sees the Incarnation as brought about by the agency of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 1:18), Addie’s adultery can be seen as the sin of “blasphemy against the Holy Ghost,” which is the single sin which can be forgiven “neither in this world, neither in the world to come” (Matthew 12:31, 32). Addie’s intention is to ensure her own damnation in order, paradoxically, to free herself from subordination to divine control. In short, the only freedom, in Addie’s bleakly Calvinistic vision, is the freedom to damn oneself.

After describing the end of the affair with Whitfield and her discovery that she is pregnant with Jewel, Addie repeats her father’s grim aphorism. But this time she gives it a meaning very different from that which he had intended, and she follows it with a statement of bitter triumph in place of her earlier despair: “My father said that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead. I
knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself.” Now Addie’s implied meaning is that one’s duty while alive is to do something real, satisfying, and individual in order to assert the fact that one has lived before the oblivion of death. This was her aim when she beat her pupils, married Anse, and gave birth to Cash. But each of these having proved inadequate, she undertakes the adultery which leads to the birth of Jewel. At last her sense of obligation is discharged: “With Jewel [...] the wild blood boiled away and the sound of it ceased.” But she has achieved this sense of freedom and fulfillment only through a desperate act of defiance of God’s will which puts her beyond the power of Providence at the cost of securing her own damnation.

The fact that Addie thinks of herself as damned is clear from Cora’s evidence in the preceding monologue in which the latter’s pious platitudes are ludicrously inadequate to Addie’s perverted but heartfelt religious convictions. Cora describes her saying: “I know my own sin. I know that I deserve my punishment” (39:159). And at the end of her own monologue Addie reflects on the difference between Cora and herself: “people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too” (40:168). Rather than meaning simply that salvation is open to her by means of an act rather than words (as Vickery’s reading would interpret this), Addie means that she has sinned in more than merely words—she has sinned in committing a deed which cannot be forgiven and therefore salvation of any recognizably Christian kind is no longer for her.

However, Addie’s words to Cora could be interpreted to mean that for her both her damnation and her salvation are deeds rather than words, as long as “salvation” is properly qualified. Clearly her adultery was an act intended to bring about her damnation, but there is also a sense in which it was on the other hand designed to initiate a kind of salvation, though one which is far from orthodox. It is this which explains the note of triumph in her reference to the birth of Jewel at the end of her monologue, for, according to the alternative scheme of damnation and salvation which she has erected for herself, Jewel takes the place of the Redeemer by whom Addie is to be “saved.” The further associations of the word “blood” touched on above are relevant here: the Blood of the
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Lamb, blood sacrifice, and the body and blood of the Saviour as the bread and wine of the communion. In Addie's parody of the Incarnation in which the Word is made Flesh, Whitfield is the Holy Spirit, she herself the Mother of God, and Jewel the Savior (though the only sacrifice he is required to make is of his horse).

Cora remembers Addie's blasphemous remark about Jewel: "He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me" (39:160). Significantly, Addie says "Even though I have laid down my life" rather than "I will have laid down my life." She is referring, that is to say, not to her actual death in the future but to the metaphorical death she has already undergone by succumbing to the power of fate. Her adultery and the resulting birth of Jewel set her free from this by damning her. But in a more prosaic sense, too, Jewel does indeed rescue Addie's corpse both from the ford and from the burning barn—in an act of salvation by deeds rather than by words. For Addie, then, Jewel is a blasphemous equivalent of the Word made Flesh in a sense which mocks the divine Word from whose power she believes herself to be free. Whitfield, on the other hand, expresses a frightened and penitent consciousness of the impiety which Jewel represents when he imagines God telling him to "repair to that home in which you have put a living lie, among those people with whom you have outraged My Word" (42:169). The contrast is brought out in these words: while for Addie Jewel is the Word made Flesh, for Whitfield he is "a living lie."

The foregoing should have made clear the two-fold nature of the relationship between Darl and Addie in the imaginative vision of As I Lay Dying. The thematic connection is revealed both in the correspondences between their outlook and in the consequent similarity of their actions. Both have, without a belief in a personal god, a terrifyingly total sense of predestination and of the inescapability of death. Consequently, both feel their freedom of will and therefore their identity either, in Addie's case, to be threatened or, in Darl's, actually to have been destroyed. For reasons deriving from these convictions, each is driven to commit one desperate act in defiance of Providence: Addie's selfish act of adultery which starts the chain of events leading to the dangerous and destructive
funeral journey, and Darl’s firing of the barn which altruistically
tries to halt that journey. In each case there is a contradiction
between, on the one hand, the subjective concept of the action as
inevitable although self-destructive in its consequences and, on the
other hand, the objective nature of the deed as secret, anti-social,
and incomprehensible to the community in which Darl and Addie
live. Cora’s platitudes about salvation are as irrelevant to Addie’s
perverse self-damnation as are Cash’s well-meant attempts to
reconcile Darl to the asylum: “it’ll be quiet, with none of the
bothering and such” (53:228).

However, despite these similarities between the motives and
actions of Darl and Addie, there are fundamental differences in the
impact made by their life-stories, for the novel’s complex balance
between the tragic and the comic partly derives from the way in
which the selfishness of Addie is contrasted with the altruism of
Darl. Throughout the novel, the chief source of information about
the Bundrens is Darl, whose dispassionate and perceptive monologues strip bare the motives of each of his family while leaving his
own feelings enigmatic. The tone of his monologues projects a
consciousness which is fatalistic, emotionless, and, because it is
absorbed in the observation of others, devoid of a sense of its own
identity. This detached tone is suddenly interrupted by its oppo-
site—the despairing, passionate voice of his mother persevering
even after death in the expression of a totally introverted yearning
for self-definition. Her monologue, with its account of her clandes-
tine adultery and deliberate self-damnation, supplies the last piece
of information which is required in order to understand the origins
of the sickness in the Bundren family and particularly in Darl,
whose insanity presumably derives from his mother’s early rejec-
tion of him. Addie’s monologue is compelling because of its total
self-absorption, but as soon as her voice relaxes its hold then
everything she has said is ironically qualified by the rest of the
book. Not only does the following monologue of Whitfield make
clear his comically different view of their adultery, but in a more
subtle way, the attitudes that Addie expresses are put into
perspective by the whole novel, and especially by Darl’s mono-
logues. The sympathy evoked by her words is tempered both by an
awareness of the selfishness of her hunger for self-definition and
fulfillment—which has extorted from her family the terrible price which is represented by the grim funeral journey—and by an understanding of the extent to which her sufferings are self-inflicted.

Addie’s tragicomedy throws into relief the more unequivocally tragic biography of Darl whose reticent monologues, unlike her impassioned statement of self-justification, offer no explanation of his motives. For there is an irony in the fact that while Addie, the believer in deeds, uses words to explain herself, Darl, whose isolation from the realm of action is associated with his ability to expose its pointlessness with disconcerting objectivity in language of great beauty and subtlety, remains silent. It is out of this silence that Darl suddenly acts in order to try to minimize, by destroying her corpse and thereby halting the journey, the damage perpetrated by his mother. He is destroyed by this initiative as, with his deterministic fatalism and lack of belief in the efficacy of action, he must have known he would be, and he retreats into an eloquent and passionate madness that parodies in its fury the monologue of his mother. The long chain of events set in motion by Addie’s adultery both culminates in and is completed by Darl’s act of arson. His motives are as desperate and self-destructive as those of Addie in undertaking her adulterous affair, although his altruism is starkly contrasted with his mother’s selfishness. However, the last irony is that the other Bundrens remain unaware of the tragic dimension in which these two extraordinary members of the family have suffered in secret and have finally destroyed themselves. The book ends with the exorcizing of their influence—through the burial of Addie and the committal to an asylum of Darl—and the reassertion of more prosaic values as the family prepares for the return journey.