

On Analysis of the Archetype Images of the Water in *As I Lay Dying*

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Abstract: *As I Lay Dying*, written by William Faulkner who has been accepted as one of the representative writers in the American literature history, is a novel in which the biblical archetypes are widely used. Among those biblical archetypes of images, “water” is the most impressive one and by using it, Faulkner expressed his confidence that humanity can overcome all the hardships and evils.

Keywords: *As I Lay Dying*, Bible, Water, Archetypes of Images, Humanity

1. Introduction

The *Bible* is a collection of religious writings, generalizing and representing the content and spirit of the Christian. Meanwhile, as a literary masterpiece, the Bible provides a wealth of materials, classical characters and plots as well as archetype images for western literature. Naturally there are a number of great writers who has been influenced by the Bible more or less and, directly or indirectly, quoted allusions, themes, rhetorics and images derived from it. William Faulkner is undoubtedly one of them.

Born in the southern United States, the famous Bible Belt, Faulkner was brought up under the very religious atmosphere, which in return profoundly affected his literary creation. According to the American scholar Curphey’s study, Faulkner has used words or themes related to the Bible 379 times (Chen, 276). More importantly, through these biblical quotations and adoptions, he made a comparison between the spirits in Christianity and that of the modern society, which contributed to his exploration of the humanity. This paper is going to analyze the archetype images of the water in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and represent his confidence that humanity can overcome all the hardships and evils.

2. Analysis of the Archetype Image of the Water

Water is characterized by its changeability and its images are various in literary works. Water in the *Bible* exerting a significant effect on western culture has abundant symbolic images which are mainly classified into the source of life, punishment and resurrection (Jiang,115). What has been demonstrated by the water in *As I Lay Dying* are the images punishment and resurrection.

2.1. Water—Punishment

In the Old Testament, it is mentioned that the earth was corrupted in God’s sight and the wickedness of humankind was so great that every inclination of thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. Therefore, God determined to make an end of all flesh by bringing a flood of waters on the earth. The LORD said to Noah, “For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” (*Genesis*7: 4) Then the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days, which destroyed every living substance upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven.

It can be seen that the water in the *Bible* here acts as a means of punishment, bringing the evil and the wicked their doom.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the rain started when the Bundrens, a pathetic family of southern poor whites, prepared to fulfill Addie Bundren’s wish to be buried in her hometown of Jefferson, Mississippi. Addie was the center of this novel. As a wife, she was unfaithful to her husband Anse Bundren. Instead of giving real love to Anse, she cheated on him with her fornication with a priest and giving birth to Jewel; as a mother, Addie preferred her illegitimate son Jewel and rarely showed maternal affections to other

children; moreover, being a teacher in primary school, Addie did not like her students and always expected that the students would make some mistakes, so that she could whip them. It can be concluded from the deeds before her death that Addie was sinful for her infidelity to her husband, indifference to her own children and cruelty to her students. Therefore, Addie's desire of returning to hometown and going to the burial site would not be easily achieved and she had to accept the punishment from God-- the rain which destroyed the bridge that the Bundrens must cross because 'that bridge won't stand a whole lot of water' (Faulkner, 68), as well as the water which almost washed her coffin away. Because of the rain and the water, the journey to Jefferson was delayed, and then Addie's dead body began to rot with giving off a foul smell.

2.2. Water—Resurrection

Besides symbolizing punishment, water in the *Bible* has another significant archetype image, that is resurrection.

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him (*Matthew* 3:16).

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. (*Acts* 2:38)

Obviously, baptism is a death and resurrection symbol in which water serves as the transition from the former to the latter. When someone is dipped in water, he is dead, symbolically. While, when he comes up out of the water he comes up out of death-- alive again.

Addie in *As I Lay Dying*, was actually trapped between her own conflicting attitudes towards life. On the one hand she strongly inclined to preserve her separateness of her individuality when experienced continual failures and received few warmth from others; on the other hand, she still longed for love and desired to reach out to the world. Addie was born in Jefferson and she hoped to go back to her hometown as she lay dying since it was the place where she could not only have her mother buried closed by, but also achieve her inner peace. For the journey to Jefferson, each family member had their own secret plans. Cash, quiet but practical, laid his heart in the making of coffin because the devotion to his craft was his sole means for securing an identity; Dewey Dell locked herself in desperate loneliness with concentrating on finding her abortion drugs; Anse, an image of a selfish and cynical person, craves for a new set of false teeth. Throughout the fifty-nine sections, though all of them were immersing in their own business, the Bundrens fulfilled Addie's desire of being buried in her hometown. Facing the water which nearly ruined Addie's coffin and brought an end to other family member's life, Anse did not forget his promise to Addie 'I give her my promise. Her mind is set on it' (Faulkner, 88). What's more, Cash lost one of his legs when the whole family were attempting to cross the river. When came up out of the water, Addie was alive again with baptized in the water and got settled under her homeland; the Bundrens were alive again with their mission accomplished, and the black side of their nature like selfishness and ignorance conquered.

3. Conclusion

The image of water in *As I Lay Dying* is closely related with the archetype images of the water in the *Bible*, expressing the symbolical meaning of punishment and resurrection. Addie and her family members went through the water, receiving the punishment from God and got resurrection after being baptized in the water. By using the biblical archetype images of water, Faulkner expressed his confidence that humanity can overcome all the hardships and evils.

References

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