



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DEATH-BED IN FAULKNER'S FICTION: REFERENCE TO DONALD MAHON AND ADDIE
BUNDREN

Dr. VIBHA MANOJ SHARMA

Assistant Professor, Dept of English, Swami Shraddhanand College, University of Delhi, Alipur, Delhi,
India

Email: vibha.manoj@rediffmail.com



ABSTRACT

William Faulkner (1897-1962) is using death-bed as metaphor in two of his major novels to judge other major characters in relation to the persons on bed. Their honesty of relation comes up in situation in need. Moreover, Faulkner projects his objective view through community. Judging life and death and maintaining a balanced harmony in the tradition of Yoknapatawpha, mythical land, is the beauty of Faulkner's fiction universally imparted.

KEYWORDS: Death-bed, Faulkner, Touchstone, Ideal view.

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Studies on English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) writing, particularly on coherence and cohesion as well as In William Faulkner's (1897-1962) fiction, Donald Mahon in *Soldier's Pay*¹ (1926) and Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*² (1931) are lying in bed; these are not simple beds to rest; these are the death beds. Donald Mahon is brought almost dead from the war and Addie Bundren is about to die with her single wish to be buried in Jefferson, among her own people before her marriage. Only difference is that Donald is unconscious while Addie is conscious in the beginning of the novel. Both have become touchstone to judge the real worth of relations in the existing world.

In the beginning of the novel when Donald Mahon has been brought, Rector Mahon is shown quite worried taking up the lifesaving issue of his son. Miss Cecily Saunders was expected to take care of Donald while Mrs. Margaret Powers met him as a coincidence to be his remaining life partner. Emmy is another girl whom Donald loved only once. These three main characters were Faulkner's point of concentration to explore near Donald as fully on bed unconscious.

Mrs. Margaret Powers in *Soldier's Pay* had shown already married to Dick Powers; her marriage to Dick Powers was only a three days' affair after which he departed for France. It was a loveless and hasty marriage. It was rather a conscious decision; an agreement was reached that each should pursue own pleasure. Physically it was a marriage of convenience. After her husband's departure, Margaret felt lonely, and it was revived temporarily when she receives his letters:

" 'You see, I think we both had agreed that we were not in love with each other for always, ... And then, three days before he ... suggested that we get married....And so we got married and I went to

work'....' Then I began to get letters from him, addressed to his dear little wife.... I'd write him every day for a time. And then I found that writing bored me..."³

It is interesting to note that she remains faithful to Dick, and when she decides that their relationship had no justification; she wrote a letter to him announcing her decision to terminate their marriage. It was ironical that he died before the letter reached him:

"...then I made up my mind that the best thing for both of us was just to call the whole thing off. So, I sat down and wrote him...'and He never got my letter at all. He died believing that everything was the same between us.'" (p.162)

Margaret's psychology had traced with great skill and understanding. She was divided between the two worlds. As occur in the novel, she was "tricked by a wanton Fate: a joke amusing to no one" (p.30). next she meets dying Donald Mahon in the train when she is in an unresolved state of emotional coldness and thinks as:

"Am I cold by nature, or have I spend all my emotional coppers, that I don't seem to feel things like others?" (p.33). Dick was actually, physically attractive and she desired him, but, at the same time, she was repelled by the ugliness of the naked Dick's body. In fact, he was her lover whom she did not love physically, and called him:"... dead, dear Dick: that flesh, that body, which I loved and did not love; your beautiful young, ugly body. Dear Dick, become now a seething of worms, like new milk..." (p.39)

After her husband's death she becomes emotionally frozen; now she cannot love anyone. Ultimately, her dilemma has resolved when she sees Dick in dying Donald Mahon, and so marries him immediately. In point of fact, in marrying dying Donald she marries an idea rather than a person.

Mrs. Margaret Powers belongs to a definite class of women who are good as wives. She receives love letters written by Julian Lowe, and is pursued by Joe Gilligan. But Lowe's madness in love is one sided; she shows no interest in him. He is silly and superficial, and embodies immaturity of emotional love. He reminds us of Corin in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Similarly, when Gilligan, who is deeply in love with her, asks "'Ma'am, Let's get married,'" she replies dispassionately: "'Bless your heart, Joe. Don't you know my name is Mrs.?' " (p.36)

In these complex relationships, Margaret emerges as a powerful woman as wife who has delineated committed to the code of conduct. As a wife, she remains committed to Dick Powers; the frigidity of emotion that results from the delayed arrival of her letter of termination of the marriage, is the result of her humanity and grace; her marriage with dying Donald is the culmination of that humanity, and the unity of "two of the living dead, both victims of the 'rotten luck.'"⁴ In the development of this character we have made aware of Mrs. Powers's great sincerity and faithfulness as wife, as she sees Dick in Mahon "(Dear dead Dick.) (Mahon under his scar, sleeping.) (Dick, my dearest one)" (p.38); this way she commands reader's sympathy. Here Faulkner maintains, as does Robert Browning, in the delineation of his characters, a balance between "reader's sympathy and moral Judgement."⁵

In contrast to Margret, Cecily Saunders is an iconoclast, one who stands opposite to all that is traditional and settled. She is rightly called "flapper of this period."⁶ Faulkner creates her as a test case "for superficiality and shallowness that he sees in society."⁷ She is a specimen of sexual manic. She is flirtatious, and to a great extent promiscuous. Although she lacks sensuality, she plays at sex; she represents "a generation of hollow men whose, ideal female is an epicene creature - - asexual, superficial, selfish and silly."⁸ Faulkner takes Cecily as a woman representing profane love. For her, life is a game of flirtation, and seriousness bores her, and even agitates her.

The return of wounded Donald is a situation which tests Cecily. The idea of being engaged to a wounded war hero fascinates her, but she cannot tolerate the presence of a sick soldier on death bed with disfigured face. She is an affront to the sanctity of conjugal commitments. On her father's propulsion that she should help Donald to recover by sparing some time and being with him, she surrenders herself to George Farr sexually. Even she does not mind when Januaries Jones calls her a "little bitch" (p.131) for her surrender to George. In fact, George is the boy her father had forbidden her to see. But she persists on. This act of defiance

shows her as a doll, a pliant woman playing at sex, and one who uses free sex as a means of expressing her rebellion. Her sexual behavior even agitates George when he says:

“Yes! Yes! She was a virgin! But if she won’t see me it means somebody else. Her body in another’s arms.... Why must you? What do you want? Tell me: I will do anything, anything...” (p.149)

Not that Cecily is only a sexual manic; at times, sex repels her. Rather sex-acts and sexual experiences bring her closer to reality. She is a kind of domineering sexual assaulter. When George ignores her, she flirts with others; if she was driven towards dying Mahon, it was because of her fear that Jones will expose her affair with George. In fact, she is in a state of confusion, and she herself is unaware of that when she says:

“Yes, Yes, Donald. I will, I will! I will get used to your poor face, Donald! George, my dear love, take me away, George.” (p.265)

Her rebellion reaches a climax when her parents prevent her marriage to dying Donald, and she flees to George. Conjugal commitments hold no significance for her. She treats her marriage to George as lightly as she treats sex. She is “detached from femaleness.”⁹ She thinks about herself as she is “not a good woman any more. Oh well, it had to be sometime, I guess”. (p.149).

She is, in fact, not “for maternity, not even for love: a thing for eye and the mind” (p.156). She detests the idea of bearing a child “blurring her slim epigenetic, blurring her body with pain” (p.139). Faulkner paints her as an ugly specimen of womanhood, because she only wants loveless sex which is sterile and uncreative. In the words of Jones she belongs to “the animal kingdom” (p.71). And, else, she has referred to as “cat!” (p.205), and is also called “poor girl” (p.205). Donald’s metaphorical death bed proves her a failure.

The novel propounds the effect of outward events related to the state of Donald on the psyche of Emmy. Emmy is a woman of whom Brooks calls “ultimate values.”¹⁰ Through her Faulkner offers the possibility of platonic love even in death.

Emmy has been cherishing a dream which could give meaning to drab and dull life: “Come here Emmy? Ah, come to me, Donald. ‘But he is dead’” (p.266) She longs for that momentary experience in the past when Donald made love to her and, thus, made life meaningful for her. There is a nostalgic passage that can read as:

“And so I laid down. I couldn’t see anything except the sky, and I don’t know how long it was when all of a sudden there was his head against the sky, over me, and he was wet against and I could see the moonlight kind of running on his wet shoulders and arms, and he looked at me. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I could feel them on me. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I could feel them somehow like things touching me. When he looks at you-you feel like a bird, kind of: like you was going swooping right away from the ground or something” (p.123)

About them and their experience Brooks corroborates, “A Faun, he has his companion nymph. With the simple and primitive Emmy.....all this is romantically idyllic.”¹¹

But when the wounded Donald returns and fails to recognize her, Emmy’s dreams shattered. Her dream is her only possession, and is referred to as “Cinderella dream” (p.119). She tries to separate the Donald of the present, who has lost his memory, from the Donald of the past, full of romance, love and affection. For her, to use Shakespeare’s words, “life is such stuff as dreams are made on.”¹² She stands for the dream in human relationship that makes life worth living. Even women of the town, in *Soldiers’ Pay*, think positively about Emmy.

“Nor could they ever tell whether or not he know whom he had married. Perhaps he didn’t care Emmy, efficient and gentle, mothering him, was a trifle subdued.” (p.91)

Brooks also suggests that “if Donald has to be married to anyone, his proper bride is Emmy, who has loved him all the times and loves him now.”¹³ But the death of Donald strips Emmy’s life fully that she shows her resentment again Mrs. Donald:

“.... (I would have cured him! If they had just let me marry him insisted of her!) (If I could just cry. You are prettier than me, with black hair and your black hair and your painted mouth that’s the reason). ‘Come, Emmy.’ Mrs. Mahon said ‘Let me alone! Go away!’ she said, fiercely, ‘you got him

killed: now bury him yourself.' 'he would have wanted you to come, Emmy, 'the other woman said gently.' Go away, let me alone, I tell you!'" (pp.301-302)

The only thing that goes against her is letting Jones take her body on the very day of Donald's death. Referring to this Kinney uncovers that it 'is one of the chief revelations of Emmy's character'¹⁴ but we find that it is not because of her any liking of Jones. Her intention is made obvious in the novel when she shows indifference to Jones advances. She rather professes hatred for him, and shows violent repulsion to this action. No matter that her indifference makes him more obsessive for her. Besides, it was not a conscious act for flirtation in the case of Emmy:

"'Go away,' Emmy repeated to another touch on her shoulder, thinking she had dreamt. It was a dream! She thought and the frozen dish-rag in her chest melted with unbearable relief, becoming tears. It was Jones who had touched her." (p.302)

In fact, she attaches no significance to him, like Tess of Hardy, remains pure. Her intension remains obvious as continues recalling Donald. After Donald's funeral, she is exalted by Jones in the conclusion of the novel to "Biblical rock". As he says: "people come and go, but Emmy and I seem to be like the Biblical rock" (p.323). She is still and permanent like rock.

Emmy's ideal virtues have judged through character contrast. Obliquely and implicitly, she has been juxtaposed with Cecily who stands for flirtation and sex game. Cecily's escapist actions are set against Emmy's enduring behavior. Commenting on the contrasted nature of both, Broughton states: "Cecily... runs away... Emmy... endures."¹⁵ Thus, Emmy has shown as an ideal woman who remains true to her dreams, and committed to her ethics and the sanctities of human relationships.

Cleanth Brooks obfuscates Addie Bundren of *As I Lay Dying* as "strong and powerful,"¹⁶ woman married to "a shiftless and pusillanimous husband."¹⁷ As the novel begins, Addie lies silently in her bed, watching Cash, her son, sawing her coffin beneath the window. Meanwhile, she dies; to fulfil her last wish, as her dead body was to be carted away in the family wagon to be buried in Jefferson, Mississippi. It is both, to use an expression from Albert J. Guerard, "a journey within" and "a journey without."¹⁸ A story of a voyage, *As I Lay Dying* "plunges into the secret life of the journeyers."¹⁹ The whole history of the Bundrens is laid bare, and also, by implication, the funeral journey is "a symbol of all human activity."²⁰

Although as wife and mother Addie remains at the center, she being dominant cannot be placed in the category of those characters embody Faulkner's concept of ideal womanhood. She has self-willed. Irving Howe says: "Hard, single-minded, intolerant, Addie is one of Faulkner characters concerning whom one finds little to admire except their utter insistence upon taking and struggling with life until the end."²¹ For her, words of her father that "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time,"²² serve as a guide. In fact, she wants to achieve a sense of identity, and, thus, to feel alive in death.

Addie concentrates her thoughts on 'sex and death' as Faulkner describes in *Soldiers' Pay* too as "the front door and the back door of the world" (p.300)). Her marriage with Anse is, of course, loveless; she says twice "so I took Anse" (p.134) means that her marriage was not preceded by courtship. Here is a well-considered decision; she learns that Anse has a good house and farm. She asks Anse: "A new house, '... Are you going to get married?'" (p.135). and they become man and wife. However, she never found real identity in the relationship. She bears him children, but also bears him an illegitimate son, Jewel. She commits adultery. She reminds us of Hester in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet letter*. Like Hester, Addie commits adultery with the priest, Reverend Whitfield, and keeps it a secret from her husband and all. Anse simply says on her death: "'God's will be done'.... 'Now I can get them teeth.'" (p.44). He proves to be a selfish, lusty and resource-less person. Soon after Addie has buried in Jefferson, he has wooed, and won a new Mrs. Bundren. This is how Addie's significance becomes zero as a wife

Mrs. Addie Bundren's role as mother is even more crucial in the novel as Brooks states, "the importance that Faulkner placed on the relation of a child to its mother"²³ cannot be doubted. The responses of the Bundren children are based on their emotional relationship with their mother. Three of the four sons of Addie, love her intensely, though in their own way. Vardaman, the youngest son has childlike dependence on

her; he is severely traumatized by the death of his mother; he confuses his mother with the large trout he has just caught, and bores holes in her coffin to allow her to breathe. Cash shows complete loyalty with an abandon; his leg is broken during the funeral journey; Jewel is fully devoted to her. And to him the body in the coffin is his mother, and so, he can take any risk; he is prepared to make any sacrifice, and spares no effort to keep the wagon going. It is he who rescues the coffin from the swollen river. Dewey Dell, too, shows grief over Addie's death.

Mother child relationship comes up that metaphor of Addie's 'death,' 'like Ivory' in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and 'silver' in *Nostramo*, serves as a touchstone to assess every other character in her relation. It enables them to explore their own identity and juxtapose the mystery of "I am" against the unfathomable state of "I am not," "I was." 'Being' and 'non-being' are put side by side. After the death of Addie, Vardaman goes into the barn and touches Jewel's horse to feel life. Darl's identification is more intellectual:

"I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows... that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not."
(p.65)

Arthur F. Kinney comments, Darl's "speculation ...and value of existence is prompted by his version of her death."²⁴ Jewel's relationship with his horse duplicates his relationship with Addie. He brings her flood and fire. As she expresses for Jewel:

"He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire."
(p.133)

Darl broods over Addie's extramarital sexual escapades. He refers to her adultery when he recalls a French "spy-glass" (p.202); in that there was a picture of "a woman and a pig with two backs and no face" (p.202). He constantly questions Jewel:

"'Whose son are you?'.... 'Your mother was a horse, but who was your father, Jewel?'"
(p.168)

Darl sees too much and perceives too much. Like Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a solitary thinker, Darl goes mad. His concentration upon Jewel as "wooden" reflects his knowledge of Addie's reflection of himself. He reminds us of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and like him has the valid reason to say "if I'd just had a mother!" (p. 156). As he reckons: "I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel's mother is a horse." (p. 75).

It is because of Addie's willfulness that she fails to bring the family to live up to her expectations. Her marriage to Anse is based upon weak foundation because she marries him for convenience, and he proves himself indolent, callous and indifferent husband. She finds her identity in Reverend Whitefield with whom she commits the sin; she breaks the code of her marriage; as mother, she takes no joy in the birth of Cash or Darl as in Jewel. According to Anse "she was ever a particular woman." (p. 73).

Arthur F. Kinney rightly points out that "life fails Addie because Addie fails life."²⁵ Her father's words are a fit commentary on her that life is a long death. It is symbolically delineated in her family's response to her death. She is buried in her wedding dress which means that she marries death at last. Certainly, Addie remains complex character; her death is all the more unnatural as the corn cob rape of Temple Drake in *Sanctuary*.

Dewey Dell Bundren is the most inactive and passive figure as Ruppensburg says for her "a narrower range of interest"²⁶ so much so that she shows least involvement in her mother's death. Addie also reveals "the same impersonal and unemotional attitude towards Dewey."²⁷ Of course, Dewey's fanning her dying mother shows her consideration and concern for her mother but during the fanning she has locked in her thinking of going to Jefferson for buying abortion pills. So, her fanning is just an outward show, and there is discrepancy between seeming and reality. She can be contrasted with Caddy Compson, who is more caring, and acts like a mother to her brothers. Dewey lacks such feelings, and is blank and mindless maid who thinks puzzled

"I said you don't know what worry is. I don't know what it is. I don't know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not. I don't know whether I can or not. I don't know whether...." (p.33)

Dewey's pregnancy is the result of her senseless and careless behavior. She lacks introspection and concern for future because of her own notion of imperviousness. Instead of blaming herself for her loose behavior, she considers her seduction as the mischief of her 'fate': "Because I said if the sack is full when we get to the woods it won't be me. I said if it don't mean for me to do it the sack will not be full, I will turn up the next row but if the sack is full, I cannot help it.... I said 'What are you doing?' and he said I am picking into your sack'. And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could not help it." (p.24)

She does not want to make her pregnancy public. As Darl talks her, "the reason you will not say it is, when you say it, even to yourself, you will know it is true: is that it?" (p.34). On the occasion, she realizes the power of the words but remains quite so as to keep her pregnancy a secret. She even harbors a secret thought to murder Darl, and finds temporary release in the fantasia. In fact, pregnant Dewey wants, as Noel Polk says, "nothing more than to scrape her child away."²⁸

According to Joseph W. Reed, "Dewey Dell's simple dependence is comic."²⁹ And Dewey considers her as Reed says "doomed to the intrusion inside the circle which Addie before her both loved and hated."³⁰ Moseley and McGowan reveal contrasting attitude towards Dewey's pregnancy. The former responds to her need for pills with self-righteous moral authority, and the latter takes advantage of her body. In fact, both show concern for her pregnant, unmarried and comic situation, but no concern for her as a person. She has been compared to a "wildcat."³¹ Her eyes seem like "pistols," (p.88), and "kind of blaring up and going hard" (p.95). Most of the time she is lost in interior monologue which reveals her true nature:

"The dead air shapes the dead earth in the dead darkness, farther away than seeing shapes the dead earth. It lies dead and warm upon me, touching me naked through my clothes..... I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth". (p.53)

In Dewey's character Faulkner rejects all the possibilities of relations. She appears before us an unthinking creature and incapable of playing her role as daughter or sister or maid. She is just an item in the family, an obligation. Also she represents a simple country maid who can fall a victim to anyone who has an intention to use her body:

"Her leg coming long that lever which moves the world; one of the caliper which measures the length and breadth of life." (p.81)

Any excuse will do for her carelessness. In the Southern background, she simply fills a gap and has no significant job either to impress others or to flatter herself. Thus, she is one such figure in Faulkner's fiction who lacks femaleness. She reminds us of the typist girl in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Faulkner, like Eliot, is stressing the futility of sexual act in her. It is not a procreative act; rather, it is a move towards stasis. She is devoid of sisterhood and motherhood. In sum, Dewey Dell embodies fertility in reverse to Cecily.

Faulkner was conscious of man's baseness and his tendency to do evil, as he said "Man was incapable of anything but baseness."³² But he also suggested a way to come out of this "house of darkness" (the phrase is jam's) positive value alone could make this world a happy home with families which could endure. He expounds "it can be done within, committal with, the normal life which everyone should have."³³ A normal life within social norms alone could make a home happy and cozy. That home has inhabitants who have courage and endurance peace and security.....devotion and sacrifice. Faulkner's conception of ideal home is suggested in his own words:

"Home means not just today, but tomorrow and tomorrow, and then again tomorrow and tomorrow. It means someone to offer the love and fidelity and respect to who is worthy of it, someone to be compatible with, whose dreams and hopes, are your dreams and hopes, who wants will work and sacrifice also that the thing which the two of you have together shall last forever; someone whom you not only love but like too, which is more, since it must outlast what when we are young we mean by love because without the liking and the respect, the love itself will not last."³⁴

Faulkner sums up his conception of ideal home and community through Mrs. Cora Tull in *As I Lay Dying*. She can be taken as an ideal mother and wife figure who follows, the social code and ethical norms that make home happy, and a community sustaining; Cora as his wife “that ever strives for sanctity and well doing like she says I am” (p.58). And, she considers herself meant for her husband and children’s comfort:

“I should hope so. I have tried to live right in the sight of God and man, for the honor and comfort of my Christian husband and the love and respect of my Christian children. So, that when I lay me down in the consciousness of my duty and reward I will be surrounded by my duty and reward I will be surrounded by loving faces, carrying the farewell kiss of each of my loved ones into my reward. Not like Addie Bundren dying alone, hiding her pride and her broken heart.” (pp. 21-22)

Vernon Tull pays her the best compliments when he comments “the reason the Lord had to create woman is because man doesn’t know his own good when he sees it” (p.58). She says further a “woman’s place is with her husband and children, alive or dead” (p.21). So, we find hard to agree with Vickery when he limits that Cora’s “family ties are moral rather than emotion.”³⁴ But, we fully agree with the critic when he states lady as an embodiment of “propriety.”³⁵

Cora’s commitment to the practices of Christian values and norms of community is beyond doubt. She represents the traditionalism of Christianity. She is a religious lady who can talk endlessly on God, religion, duty, etc. She believes that faith is restored by God Himself and is revealed in “His bounteous love for His creatures” (p.22). According to Panthea Reid Broughton, Cora believes in the logic of “hand-of-God theory.”⁷⁵ In this why, she firmly believes in the positive virtues of duty, love, faith, mercy, good and evil, sin and redemption and salvation. As a true Christian woman, she extends help to her neighbors, and is especially kind towards Addie. She even prays for her wellbeing.

Cora offers an ideal view on human behavior. She furnishes an objective assessment on life and death of Addie. She comments on her burial, and, also raises and answers serious questions concerning sin and salvation. Throughout the novel Cora and Addie are contrasted figures; Cora’s traditional views on Christianity and duties of a woman as mother and wife are set against those held and practiced by Addie. According to Cora, Addie “had a hard life, but so does every woman” (p.133); this shows her awareness of the fate of all women that is the common lot of women to suffer. Hence, her view to life is optimistic that cornice as one can find happiness even in smaller jobs, and even by praising common courtesies. She admires Addie as the best cook in the neighborhood. .

Greatest ever praise can be bestowed upon Cora for her views on sin and salvation grouts; and the interestingly thing is that even though she is an ordinary lady, she has pro rata (proportional) views on this grave subject. As Broughton says, “Cora asks Addie” frankly “where is your salvation?” and “life is short enough,....to win eternal grace in” (p.133). For Cora, Jewel is Addie’s punishment, but for Addie he is her ‘cross’ and her ‘salvation’, Addie replies: “He will save me from the water and from the fire” (p.133). Cora thinks positively about these abstract “words” which are a commentary on Addie hollow conception that “people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too” (p.140). But, Cora’s faithfulness and commitment to moral and social code profess that sin and salvation are not merely hollow “words,” but carry serious connotations.

Cora is, certainly, projected as an incarnation of feminine principal and ideal womanhood. So, to conclude, Faulkner has used the death-bed metaphor as touchstone to protract characters and virtues related to the life and the death, in both the novels set in Yoknapatawpha. The metaphor suggests life in all its complexities, grouses and graces, serving its end unto death. Here Faulkner’s approach is utterly realistic and universal other than regional one.

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A Brief Bio of Corresponding Author

Dr. Vibha Manoj Sharma is Assistant Professor in Swami Shraddhanand College, University of Delhi, Alipur, Delhi. She has done her M.A. (English Literature) from Govt. College Faridabad, M. D. University Rohtak, and Ph.D. also from M. D. University Rohtak. She is writer and critic presently engaged in Post-doctoral work. She is having teaching experience of Under Graduate and Post Graduate classes of more than 13 years in D.U. and at other Universities. Her specialization is in American Fiction. Three Books are on her credit; 2 in American Fiction & one is of poetry and short stories.
