Numerology and Ritual in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying

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In *As I Lay Dying* William Faulkner employs numerology to concretize the ritual of death as well as draw the reader's attention to its function and significance. Although multiple studies have offered detailed analyses of the text, none until today has tackled the subject of numbers in association with the theme of death. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the writer used numerology in order to present the nihilism of the human condition, to outline the manner by which the experience of nothingness can transform a pessimistic view into an optimistic one, and to show that the process of redemption and transcendence can spring from "the *Reductio ad absurdum* of all human endeavor" (Volpe 131). The article will also stress that death constitutes a major transitional state through which, Addie, the protagonist, must travel from this world to the next; and elucidate the characters, the plot, and the structure of the novella via the signified nuances attached to the chosen numbers.

1

> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. (Ps. 23.2–4)

According to Mircea Eliade, the symbols of initiatory death and rebirth are complementary. When he argued that "ritual death tends to be valuated not only as an initiatory ordeal necessary for a new birth but also as a privileged situation in itself," he projected the dead as "the possessors of arcane knowledge, prophecy, and poetic inspiration" (89). In this light, by undergoing Addie's ordeal, the reader first returns to "the pre-cosmogonic chaos, to the amorphous and undesirable state that precedes any cosmogony" and then, together with her transposition re-invents the self (89). Plato stated that to die meant to be initiated as a being; in other words, he explained death as killing one's old self in order to bring forth transformation and renewal (Plato 1209). Hence the death of the old self becomes the central mystery that is re-actualized in each initiation. In fact, by dying ritualistically, the initiate shares in the spiritual mystical condition as ritualistic and initiatory death become interchangeable while physical death is assimilated with the transitional rite toward a higher state of being. As such "initiatory death becomes the *sine qua non* for all spiritual regeneration, for the survival of the soul and, ultimately its immortality" (Eliade 131, emphasis in original).

2 This ritual not only leads to the conquest of one's fear of actual death but also to the belief in the purely spiritual survival of the human being. As a matter of fact, "initiatory death simultaneously signifies the end of the natural man, and the passage to a new modality of existence that of being born to spirit, that is, a being that does not live solely in an immediate reality" (Eliade 132). Seen from another perspective, death becomes attractive because of the possibilities it offers since not only does it prepare us for a purely spiritual rebirth, it also helps us access a state of being that refuses to be subjected to the destructibility of time (Eliade 136). As a consequence, the reader is alerted to the fact that death is two-pronged: first, it enables humans to achieve union with the Divine, and second, it offers the opportunity through the death of the old self to prepare for the passage to a state of peace and happiness. As this discussion will show, Faulkner's narrative delineates both the preparation for physical death as well as the achievement of the spiritual condition.

3 Yet to grasp the meaning of numerology one has to recur to the theory of Pythagoras who, centuries ago, observed that “everything is disposed according to the numbers” and thus attached meanings to them (Planeth 230). To him, the idea of a number was a living, qualitative reality that had to be experienced; it was not something to be used, but rather something whose nature had to be discovered. In this respect he referred to numerology as a universal law similar to that of light or sound. Pythagoras traced the origin of all things back to even or odd principles, and declared that he considered a number “both as matter for things and as forming their modifications and their permanent states, and [held] that the elements of numbers are the even and the odd, and that of these, the latter is limited, and the former unlimited; and that the One proceeds from both of these for it is both even and odd” (Riedwig 2).

4 Furthermore, it is also worth stating that Pythagoras perceived mathematics as the bridge between the visible and invisible worlds and numbers a way of understanding and working with nature as well as the contemplation of eternal things that never vary. Plato, too, regarded “numbers as the essence of harmony and harmony as the basis of the cosmos and of man,” and asserted that “the movements of harmony are of the same kind as the regular revolutions of our soul” (Plato 1180). These views were later borrowed by mystics and religious thinkers who, like the ancient Greeks before them, began to study the symbolism of numbers in relation to the Bible and concluded that they yielded many implications. It is within this context that I will attempt to demonstrate that Faulkner’s use of numerology attests that in all probability he was aware of both its function and signification.

5 The first number the reader comes across when reading *As I Lie Dying* (*AILD*) that is of any import is seven. Not only is it symbolic of a perfect order or a complete cycle, it also encompasses the union of the ternary and the quaternary and is therefore, endowed with exceptional value. In the philosophy of numbers, states Juan E. Cirlot, “the ternary represents the intellectual or spiritual order and the quaternary the terrestrial order;” and adds, the septenary is considered a symbol of pain (231), and pain is pivotal in Addie’s life especially when she realizes her failure to follow deed because she gave in to word throughout her life. In addition, seven is an odd number which consists of both an odd and an even part that is, both the limited and the unlimited principles which Pythagoras postulated. Faulkner’s intention to centralize number seven in the novella and associate all numerological combinations to it is evidenced as the action unfolds.

6 In an attempt to underscore his view of death the writer splits the septenary into three and four and links both numbers to the most important event of the story, Addie’s dying which lasts for three weeks, as the title of the narrative affirms. Her burial does not follow immediately since she wishes to be buried in Jefferson, a fact that compels her family to take a trip to perform the final rite. The journey lasts four days since flooding caused the bridge they were expected to cross to collapse and they have to follow a detour. As a matter of fact, the first number, three, according to Pythagoras is limited because it is odd and reflects the duration within which Addie dies; while the second, number four, is even and signifies limitless possibilities that will arise after Addie emerges in the otherworld. Consequently, both the reader and the family focus on Addie’s dying and burial that spans a period of twenty-five days.

7 Faulkner depicts a set of daily activities carried out concurrently by the members of Addie’s family while she lies in her bed dying in order to juxtapose first the harrowing inner action she is undergoing to her corporeal inaction and second, her immobility to their physical mobility. At the same time, the process of Addie’s dying, which unfolds within three weeks, coincides with the symbolic number three. The slow process of preparing for the new state eventually jolts the dying woman into life. It is ironic, yet true, for as she awaits physical death to sweep her away not only does she realize that she is already dead but also that she has been so throughout her life, while at the same time her supine posture fills her with energy. In this light, André Bleikasten’s argument that “in *AILD*, life and death never function as antithetical concepts,” that “they are not opposed to being and non-being, but rather are defined—if they are at all definable—in terms of mutual inclusion, as death-in-life or life-in-death, and that the ambiguous zone of their encounter and exchange constitutes the very scene of the novel” comes to mind (164–65). Indeed, once Addie begins to reminisce about her past she realizes that she has lived an illusionary life based on empty words.

8 Similarly, Lewis Leary contended that she believed that death was annihilation and as she lies dying, she recognizes death as only another convenient word—neither an end nor a beginning only a continuation, a function of the mind" (77). Shockingly though, death does not prove a "convenient" word, as Leary claimed, since not only does it prompt Addie for the first time to start living, it is also reversed into a meaningful deed. Doreen Fowler argued that in Faulkner's text "life is defined as a continuous and inevitable movement toward death, thus the title exposes human existence as a gradual dying process […] suggested by the metaphors of dissolution that pervade the soul" highlights Addie's words (23). Paradoxically, however, Addie's present movement is not toward death, but life in the world beyond. In her monologue she declares, "I would just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (*AILD* 261). This holds true up to the moment the process of dying begins since once she alters word to deed not only does she unexpectedly find the courage to awaken her soul and finally begin to live during the last three weeks of her life, she also prepares to stay alive a long time afterward in the world beyond.

9 Although both Leary's and Fowler's arguments underline the major theme of the novella, they fail to point out the benefits of Addie's present state and its significance as she moves toward physical death that invigorates her and takes her from word to deed and as such from temporal death to eternal life. For the first time, not only does she distinguish between her past and present on the one hand, and her present and future on the other, she also turns her father's words into empty letters. Although she lies dying, Faulkner stresses the vivacity of her soul in its effort to achieve awareness. It is this unexpected clarity of vision that provides her with the opportunity to assess her entire life. Thus, the meaning of the ternary is evident since in this context it includes past, present, and future: the three stages which Addie experiences and examines.

10 But, three is also a number that goes beyond the conflict that arises from duality because it has the potential to unite the opposites and attain balance. This means that her experience prompts her to move toward the One which first, according to Pythagoras, is the source of all numbers and second, in theological terms, signifies the return to the Divine. Actually, as she tries to transcend Addie realizes that the future is a state that goes beyond the collision of past and present. Although knowledge of the state she aspires to attain comes slowly, she hopes that it can yield the deeply needed peace and happiness she yearned for so long. Therefore, the third state, which Addie envisions, signifies transcendence over past and present, and inspires a sense of tranquility. Hence by contemplating the future, Addie recalls and relives her past in the present, and by reviving the sorrows of the past she makes them vital parts of her future. Simultaneously, she learns that it is impossible to shake off her past or escape her present therefore she decides to carry both into the future no longer in conflict but instead, in harmony. As she draws closer to the state beyond discord that made the past and present excruciating and unfulfilling she concedes that although they are not phased out, they cease to hamper her upward progression because they have diminished in influence.

11 As Addie's experience unfolds, the reader witnesses what Frederick Hoffman referred to as "Faulknerian time" wherein "time flows from past into present" and reversely "from present into past" (24–26). He also contended that as the past pressures the present it affects the psychology and morality of the individual's actions (24). However, I see the future influencing the present and transforming Addie's attitude and vision. As a matter of fact, as she meditates on her life, time is reflected stretching to encompass the future as she begins to move closer to it, day by day until it finally overwhelms the present. She also recognizes that the third state could not have been possible at an earlier stage of her life simply because her spirit was in apathy and a death-in-life state. Irving Howe's astute statement that "the theme of death shapes life" makes absolute sense since Addie is introduced to a new life when she prepares to die and concurrently is endowed with an unprecedented spiritual energy which empowers her (176). Although Edmond Volpe shifts our attention to the dead Addie when he states that the novella revolves around "the central image of the human corpse, generating furious passions and furious activity" among her family (127). I contend instead that the writer focuses mainly on the process of dying since it is through it that she moves from past passivity to present activity and a vision of the future. Addie learns that human beings know that death is born simultaneously with their birth, that they die every second of their life, and

that the final illumination and liberation occurs when their life is terminated.

12 Throughout our life, says Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, each one of us prepares for life after death in order to free ourselves from the agony of repeated death (47). In this light, Addie undergoes a spiritual awakening as she moves upward toward a promising future—a state of eternal bliss—leaving behind the entrapments of the past and the present. Even though Faulkner concentrates on Addie's present, he also implies the future as it evolves from it and simultaneously her past through flashbacks. He stresses her present immobility which helps her acquire the necessary strength to create a new state that fulfills her as an individual. Indeed, although Volpe argued that "at the center of motion is stasis" (127), I argue that in Addie's case, motion arises from stasis. Ironically, Addie's physical immobility produces a high-powered spiritual activity that results in dramatic change. Once Addie recognizes that she has achieved what she dreamt of all along that is, a life of deed, motion sets in, immobility is overturned, and her life on earth ceases since there is no purpose to live anymore. Hence the three last weeks, before her death, signify Addie's past, present, and future, the three phases that converge and expose her character fully: her thinking as well as her feelings. In other words, she experiences a tripartite world that fuses life (future) with death (past) as well as revival, the state in between (present), that affects and compares both but, at the same time, is neither one.

13 As a matter of fact, as Addie lies contemplating death or "non-being" she succeeds in provoking "meditation upon the reality of being" (Hoffman 132). I would also like to add that Addie's triple experience may be objectified by the triangle, the geometric structure, to which I position the past and the present at its base, and the future at the vertex. With the triangular pattern the writer imposes on Addie's experience wholeness and unity since he eliminates conflict through the creation of the third alternative, the future, which is the only state that prevails at the end. Thus, past and present form the foundation on which the apex stands while the future to which the protagonist aspires, although envisioned, remains for a while beyond her reach. Furthermore, as she ascends toward the apex by moving gradually from past to present and finally toward the future, she underlines the significance of mind, body, and spirit.

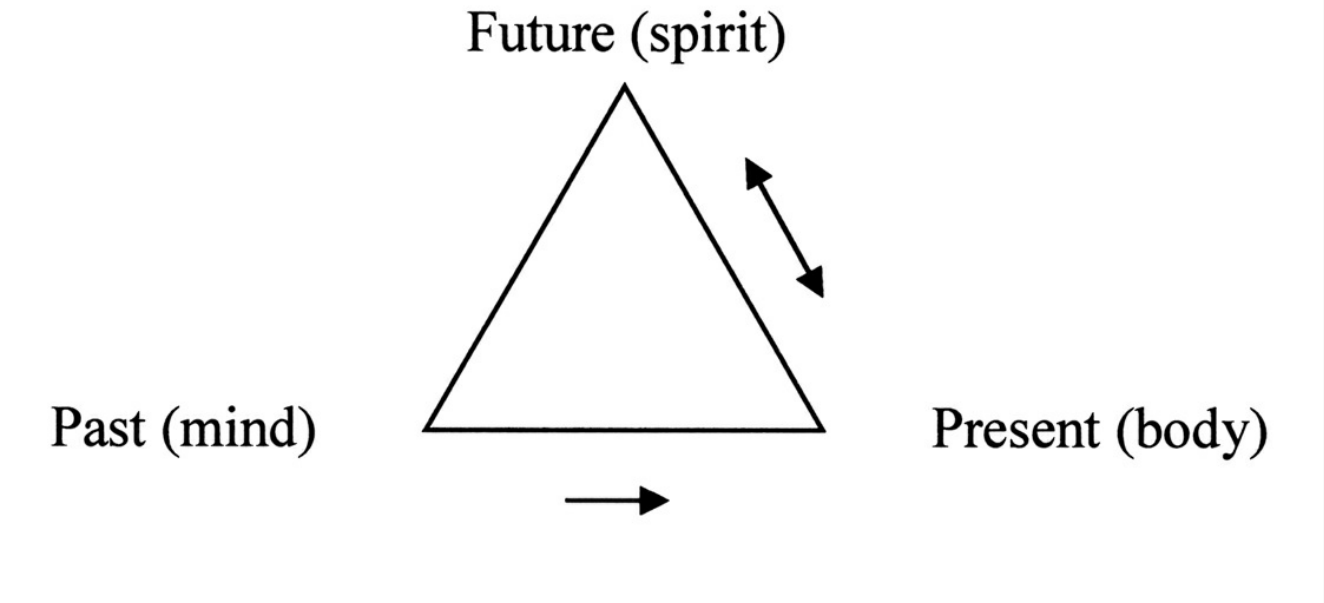

Figure 1: Each of the three angles of the triangle stands for one state and the motion is from past (mind and words) to present (body and deed) before the direction shifts to the future (spirit).

The triangle reflects the old opposition which is not obliterated since it is a crucial component as well as the motion from past to future. Furthermore, once Addie's spirit is unleashed and starts its journey toward the vertex, the future is qualified as a condition of redemption where peace originates in non-historical time. In the meantime, the reader too, accompanies the protagonist through her introspection

and participates in her experience of ritual death and initiation.

14 The next significant number associated with Addie is four which refers to the four days that follow her death. This digit represents the second part of her experience in which she ceases to be active mentally and physically. Interestingly, unlike earlier, her total immobility exposes the family members' inner mobility, their feelings and thinking, and reminds the reader of the weaknesses of her old self. Unlike number three which is connected to the triangle, four is related to the square, which symbolizes the quaternary, offers balance and stability, and is identified with the prevalence of reason in handling daily matters. The square is rooted in the earth and thus lacks the potential of transcendence and the quality of mysticism that the triangle possesses (Paneth 132). Two of its four angles face the other two and whatever motion is allowed within its perimeter may take place only from left to right or from down up, or vice versa.

15 Actually, whether one moves horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, it is always in a definite direction, and the movement is always well balanced and rationally spelled out. In addition, four according to Pythagoras, is an even and thus an unlimited number that stands for the limitless possibilities that open up to Addie after the end of her presence in this world. Michael Millgate postulates that the linear movement of the journey underlines Addie's strength to force Anse into action for the first time in his life; and declares that Anse never "violated her selfhood, her proud aloneness, and that the words like love he was so fond of using were empty abstractions" (37). During the time when Addie lies dying she distinguishes between meaninglessness and meaning on the one hand, and the desired transcendence that will follow on the other.

16 By tracing what goes on inside Addie's mind, the reader also becomes aware of the difference between the trip to Jefferson characterized by a centrifugal movement and the centripetal motion that juxtaposes and dominates the beginning of the novella. Linking the meanings of the square to my discussion I postulate that its implications reflect the linear progression of the Bundrens as they travel to Jefferson to bury Addie and as such put an end to her physical presence as well as underscore the fact that her new life has already started somewhere else although they cannot describe it because they cannot comprehend it.

17 Within the framework of the square which signifies rationality, Faulkner reveals the various practical reasons each member of Addie's family has in mind for undertaking the particular trip. Regardless of her death and her passive state that precedes it, Addie provokes each member of her family to act and expose their inner world as she stresses the connection between life and death in the symbolic image of her disintegrating body. Therefore, whatever action occurs during the days following her death is easily described as rational since each member has an ulterior motive for travelling to Jefferson. Her husband to get a new set of teeth, Dewey to have an abortion, and Cash to commission some work**.** As I have already demonstrated, although the action of the narrative, after Addie's death shifts from the triangle to the square which implies practicality, she still remains the center of attention as she continues to hold the family together not as a mother figure but through her decaying body and the forceful manifestation of her spirit. Meanwhile, the writer underlines her aloneness when he depicts her lying in her coffin and points out that loneliness has been the only condition she was familiar with throughout her life as well as during the time she lay dying. But her solitariness actually alludes to the process of initiatory death that each individual undergoes.

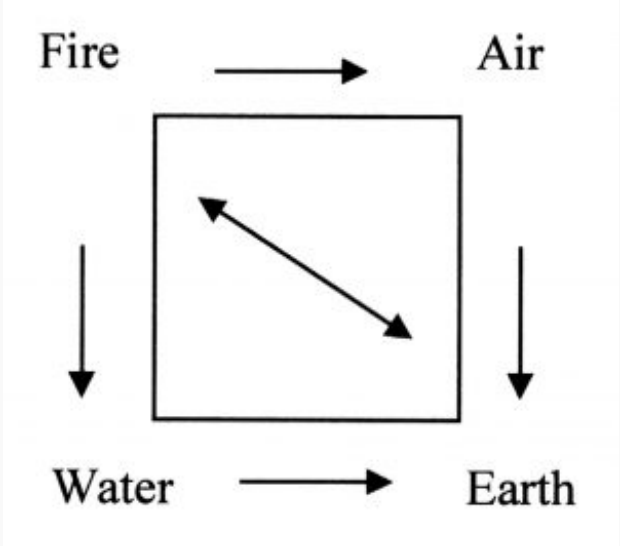

Figure 2: Movement within the perimeter of the square is limitless but balanced. The square also reflects the four elements that play a significant part in the narrative.

18 In this light, Faulkner states that “she lived, a lonely woman, lonely with her pride, trying to make folks believe different, hiding the fact that they just suffered her, because she was not cold in the coffin before they were carting her forty miles away to bury her” (*AILD* 21). Thus, the writer juxtaposes her isolation to the overwhelming power of her presence. Undoubtedly, after Addie’s burial, the indifference and spiritual sterility that dominated her life is bound to prevail as her family, most probably, will continue to live the emptiness of the word as they go their separate way. Within the context of the square the reader detects another level of meaning which explains that Addie has lived all of her life rationalizing her every action and shunning spontaneity since both her marriage and giving birth to her children were motivated by pure reason. Even when she fell in love with the preacher, Whitfield, the only time she gave in to her emotions, we are told that she reverted to reason in order to make things right by giving her husband another child “to negative Jewel” (*AILD* 168). It is in this manner that the writer brings three once more into play since Addie implies that the relationship between her, her son Jewel, and his father Whitfield, stand apart from the Bundren family. According to Sally R. Page, she is “an idealist whose desire for the achievement of an inner vision of perfect union and fulfillment within human reality drives her ultimately to a rejection of reality, of humanity, and of life itself” by suppressing emotion in favor of reason (112). This sort of behavior is evidence that Addie lived within the boundaries of the square and depended on reason rather than emotion.

19 Faulkner associates reason with the protagonist’s earthly existence signified by the square, before she abandons it once she embarks on her spiritual quest and begins to travel upward within the perimeters of the triangle toward the apex as has already been shown**.** There is no doubt in her mind that reason has no power to propel her either forward or upward. As opposed to her family that defines reason by stating their motives for the upcoming trip, she ascertains that it has proven inadequate. Furthermore, unlike the Bundrens who plan the trip and later the detour in order to reach Jefferson on time for the burial, as such maneuvering and rationalizing, Addie exhibits feeling as she lies dying. Nonetheless, both she and her family are delineated mapping their route before reaching their different destinations. On the one hand she looks forward to her upward ascent, to a meaningful condition, while her family, on the other, is trapped within the square with no hope of change. In other words, the trip to Jefferson not only offsets emotion to reason, doing to being, or deed to word it also emphasizes their meaning in relation to both Addie, who although deceased paradoxically signifies life, and her family who are alive, yet in reality are dead.

20 The quaternary also acquires an additional meaning because Faulkner links it to the four elements fire, water, air, and earth, as already illustrated by Fig. 2, that enhance not only the ritualistic aspect of his novella but are also connected to Addie. She goes through fire and water as she lies dead since the coffin falls in the river, and almost burns to ashes in the barn. Water and fire are chosen intentionally not only because they signify the *coincidentia oppositorum* but also because of their purgative function necessary for a new beginning. As for the element of air, it is introduced by Vardaman when he bores holes on the cover of his mother’s coffin to allow her to breathe; and the fourth element, earth, finalizes the presence of Addie in this world when the casket is lowered in the grave eliminating in this way number four along with the corpse.

21 Faulkner also suggests that both the ternary and the quaternary are not only associated with Addie since the first involves her spirit while the second her body but also what happened in the past and what takes place in the present as well as the foreshadowed future. Since both the ternary and quaternary symbolize the heavenly and the earthly, the spiritual and the physical experiences of Addie, this means that together they form the septenary. Having outlined her journey within the boundaries of the square during her life, and described her soul traveling upward toward the vertex of the triangle as she lies dying, the writer presages the new life that will begin in another world on the eighth day. Number eight, according to Pythagoras, symbolizes harmony and balance and signifies a new beginning, and since it is an even number it also offers unlimited potential. Consequently, with Addie’s death the triangle and the square not only come together, bringing about the completion of the cycle of life and death, they also stress transcendence over both past and present, and project the future. Once this is achieved, Faulkner

concludes his tale since whatever happens to any of the family members, once Addie is committed to her grave, is of no consequence.

22 Before her death, when experiencing the process of self-fragmentation which helps her comprehend the spiritual as well as the earthly aspects of her consciousness Addie analyzes the septenary by separating the triangle from the square. In this manner, she realizes the meaning of each and discovers the value of the former, which she relates to deed as opposed to word which she associates with the latter. Consequently, as she prepares for death, she gives meaning to her life, and devotes whatever time is left to interpreting the deed in her effort to achieve the state beyond. Unquestionably, the title of the narrative refers to putting an end to the state of death-in-life that she has lived as well as her body, inciting as such her spirit to rise, and emphasizes the realization that the state that lies beyond is devoid of conflict.

23 It is only after conceiving the fulfilling meaning of the spirit that Addie gives up the flesh entirely. She is convinced that the physical fetters have to be shed if she is to enjoy the union with the Divine in the world beyond. Furthermore, she comes to terms with the signification of the square and acknowledges that it was symbolic of her life on earth, and even though she justifies its necessity she confirms that it was also boring, insignificant, and lacked meaning since it was based on empty words and passivity. Instead, spiritual life becomes the only reality worthwhile yearning for, a perception that helps her attain the long-desired peace on the eighth day. As mentioned above, eight ushers Addie to a new life and is the result of twice four, but since four is the product of the one then eight as well springs from the one. Moreover, as Ludwig Paneth has noted eight is related to the octagon, an intermediate form between the square and the circle and is, in consequence, a symbol of regeneration. Because of its shape, it balances opposing forces, and suggests their coexistence. Paneth also notes that in eastern cultures, number eight signifies the waters of baptism and regeneration (42). Therefore, it is not coincidental that Addie's coffin falls in the river, an event that signifies her inception in the new life and underscores the role of water.

24 Faulkner also employed numbers in connection to the Bundren family which comprises of seven members: Addie, Anse and their five children. The writer has the protagonist in her sole monologue state that Anse had really three and not five children since Jewel was not his and Dewy was born "to negative Jewel" (*AILD* 168). Once more, by dividing the family into two groups the writer breaks the septenary: Anse and his three children (Cash, Jewel, and Dewey), and Addie and her two children (Vardaman and Darl). In this way the writer underlines the numerological conceptual aspect of his novella and presents the distinction in the relationship between Anse and his children, and Addie and hers, with the first signifying reason and the second emotion and imagination. Interestingly, when Addie is removed from the narrative both her children are also dismissed since Darl is confined to a mental institution and there is no hint of what befalls Vardaman. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Vardaman's statement that his mother is a fish is fraught with meaning.

25 According to Marius Schneider, the close relationship between the sea and the *Magna Mater* makes the fish a sacred and spiritual symbol (106). But the young boy's descriptive phrase is also a biblical allusion that links him to Jonah. "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jon. 1.17). Vardaman, Addie tells us, was born after Dewey Dell to replace the child she robbed Anse of. Like Jonah, Vardaman remains in the belly of *Magna Mater* as such he never attains full identity within his family. Moreover, the author also used numbers when he decided to introduce eight characters to comment on the Bundren family: Vernon Tull, Cora, Peabody, Samson, Armstid, Whitfield, Moseley, and MacGowan. Yet he made further use of numerology since he multiplied eight by seven, two digits he has already used, to yield fifty six sections that make up his tale. Finally, there are three parts which are related to Addie: her monologue and the two sections that depict the casket engulfed by fire and floating down the river which when added bring the number of sections to fifty-nine.

26 In conclusion, it should be pointed out that by fusing numbers with the ritual of death Faulkner succeeded in going beyond the limitations of the Bundren locale. By delineating the specific nucleus (the

Bundren family) the writer paradoxically manages to dissolve the boundaries set by time and place and not only transcend and present a universal experience but also make a statement about the human condition. Numerology helped the author create three different concentric realities-past, present, and future-that are linked and flow toward eternity. By first dividing and then uniting the septenary the writer managed to connect the ritualistic theme to the structure of his narrative and highlight its significance. It is also worth mentioning that the novelist's dexterity and complex thinking prove that the meaningful use of numbers is not coincidental since through them he combined the past state with the present wherein individuals may begin to create their own time sequence in order to create their new self.

27 Actually, Faulkner's tale is not only about Addie's journey to the otherworld but also an opportunity for her family to discover their real self as well as a quest for the reader who is advised to discern the meaning of the septenary and its association with ritual death and initiation. Upon first reading the novella, one notes its simplicity since it is a story that deals with simple people yet immediately, one realizes that the use of numerology and its signification not only complicates the narrative it also enriches it immeasurably. After all, Faulkner's intention to blend the septenary with his subject matter in order to concretize the soul's motion from one state of consciousness to another; as well as to link the text's structure to the ritualistic meaning of death proves that he was aware that numbers were fraught with multiple meanings. The narrative treats primarily Addie's personal experience but also grapples with the individual coming to terms with the state of death-in-life and the manner by which to overcome it. In a nutshell, the novella may be considered a blueprint that can prepare us not only to "walk through the valley of death" since initiatory death leads to transcendence and "a new modality of existence" (Eliade 132), but also to lie down to rest in "the green pastures" of the world beyond (Ps. 23.2–4).

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