Cash: The True Patriarch Essay, Research Paper

In reading the novel As I Lay Dying, many questions arose in my mind. However, the one that plagued me was the question that I could not pin down. All of the characters in the book have a personality and play a certain role in the tale. However, the one character who fascinated me, yet I could not explain was Cash. Is Cash a bigger player in the novel than it appears on the surface? I believe he is. Cash is the cog in the family that keeps the others from spinning away. Cash becomes, throughout the course of the novel, the patriarchal figure in the novel. He is thrust in to this position through his words, actions, and Anse s total lack of leadership. Cash becomes that patriarch.

Diligence. Definition: ” Close application, perseverance.” “We can hear the sawing on the board. It sounds like snoring,” (9). This quotation is a summation of Cash working on the coffin. Quotations such as these are thick in the beginning of the story. In fact, his work provides a backdrop the turmoil of the action which precedes the Burdens departure. His work is constant through Jewel and Darl going for wood, Addie s actual death, and the search for a wagon to name a few problems. We are constantly reminded of the droning saw in the back ground. Additionally, we are also told of Cash s attention to the details. He is totally focused on his work. The work on the coffin is a metaphor for Cash s diligence throughout the novel. It becomes a template for many of Cash s actions throughout the story. Cash is the one member of the family who has something to do and does it well. In his words, “It is better to build a tight chicken coop, than a shoddy courthouse,” (234). By this he means that it is better to do a good job on all projects than to neglect those that seem insignificant. He has a focus that seems to radiate into the family and earns him a level of respect which seems to me normally reserved for the head of a family. Diligence is valuable to any family. It is necessary for progress; and just like the universe, if we are not moving forward we are collapsing. I think this hold true in a family as well. Diligence props up a family and allows for growth. Cash keeps the Bundren s moving forward.

Pragmatism. Definition: “Steady and thoughtful accomplishment of a task, involving truth.” The perfect example of Cash s pragmatism is the chapter in which Cash lays out his list. He describes out the forces and considerations it takes to build a coffin. He explains all the angles that are necessary in making the thing tight and remain together. “I made it on a bevel. 1,2,3, etc. . .”(82). His entire chapter is dedicated to explaining how to properly put a coffin together. I believe it is a metaphor for his holding the family together. Another example of his pragmatic ways is the talk of balance, and its importance: “It wasn t on balance. I told them that if they wanted it to tote and ride on a balance, they would have to. . .” (165). He orders things, this is evidence of his pragmatic style of thought. This is clear when we look at the coffin as a metaphor for the balance in Cash s life. Do the job steadily and in order, I think that would be a good slogan for Cash. Pragmatism keeps the family on a level plane. His pragmatic behavior enables the family to avoid the giant losses. It lends consistency to an inconsistent family. This family is certainly not the Cleaver s, and I think without Cash s virtue of pragmatism it would quickly erode.

Courage. I don t think one must look very far to see Cash demonstrate his courage. If wee look to the scene where the family wrecks the wagon in the river, we see man who has balls of steel when it appears that all will be lost. He gives the orders to make the crossing as easy as possible; however, when events deteriorate , Cash stand firm. When the wagon becomes unsteady, Darl jumps. Cash on the other hand tries to hold the coffin in place and save the wagon. He holds on until the wagon goes almost completely under. We never hear him scream or curse or act afraid in any way. Rather, he keeps his calm in the face of disaster. A second example of Cash s courage is when he finally emerges from the river with a broken leg. All the while he remind the other members of the family that, “I can last it, it ain t but one more day. It ain t no bother to speak of, ” (207). Cash shows real guts with that broken leg, courage most of us would not have (I know, I have broken my leg and I can tell you it is the most painful thing I have ever experienced!). The courage is compounded when Cash has concrete poured on his leg as a makeshift cast (208). I believe that Cash knows what the cement will do to his leg, but submits in order to keep moving. While Cash s pragmatism and diligence may offer a combination that enables they family to function; it is Cash s courage that makes people take a look at him, and follow his lead. Courage is the force that every family must have in order to gain legitimacy. He becomes someone they can follow and look too.

I suppose know I am to the point where it becomes necessary to tie my description to my initial claim: “because of the aforementioned qualities Cash is the patriarchal center of the novel.” I think it is important to keep in mind the type of people that are involved in the novel, especially Anse. He is a man of terrible character (that is assuming he even has character). He is a man who stays on the shore while his sons risk their lives to save their mother s corpse from floating down the river. (143-140). Anse is lazy. Moreover he is not a good leader of his family; he is someone who wallows in self-pity and looks for sympathy. A good example is the scene where he “borrows” Dewy Dell s money. He makes her feel so guilty she has no choice but to give him the ten dollars. A father should be ashamed to use such tactics. Moreover, every time he tells us not to “begrudge him” he is begging for sympathy. Anse creates a void by failing to be the patriarch in the family, and whether he realizes it or not, Cash fill that void. He becomes the figure people look to with respect. The brothers and sister seem to look to him, not their father when they have a question. Let s have a look at the text.

Although Anse is the one who says they are going to Jefferson to bury Addie, it is Cash that makes it happen. He builds the coffin. He is the figure that creates the final resting place for his dead mother. His caring and hard work went into the initializing of the trip. When Vardamen bores holes into the coffin, he takes time to create fitted plugs. Cash seals her. No one else seems to care, but Cash makes sure that everything is good and ready for the expedition. Next, we have the scene when the brothers are attempting to load the coffin into the wagon (Anse is noticeably absent). We see Cash concerned for the balance of the coffin. He does not want to risk dropping his mother on the hill while loading. He wants the situation to be perfect. I believe this is out of respect and responsibility, virtues the others lack.

This family is one which seems to be out of control. We have a dead mother that did not seem to care for any of her children other than Jewel. We see a father who is pitiful in his relationships; both family and social. He is inept and is a user. Darl is an oddity, he is “not of this world.” He seems to be a strange person, not seeming to fit in this family. Dewey Dell and Vardamen are young and naive. However, we then come to Jewel who is not even related fully to the other siblings. He is the illegitimate, yet favorite son of Addie. The overall picture I draw from this family is one of chaos. I see a picture of a family crying out for rescue. What does every chaotic situation need, Balance.

Balance is an important entity when looking at what constitutes Cash s makeup. I think it is a balance of will and determination that make Cash such a solid man in this novel. Additionally, balance is constantly used as a metaphor for Cash. He is the calm in the storm when they are struggling in the river, balancing the coffin with his leg. He is the firm hand who controls Darl and Jewel when Vernon decides not to let them use his mule to cross the river. He balances the brothers with his words. He is the courage that supports his family in times of crisis (ex. Jewel s horse and Dewy Dell s pregnancy), balancing the family with his actions. Cash s level headed balance provides a leadership compass for the family.

I think it is also extremely important to realize that Darl turns to Cash and asks him (not Anse) why he didn t tell him when the men hauled him away. “I thought you would have told me, I never thought you wouldn t have,” (237). However, he does try to tell Darl, but is unable to sit up (238). Cash is the figure that offers the explanation to the family, the role the father should have filled. He understand why Darl may have done it. He talks of the arrest and subsequent events in a very thoughtful way. He doesn t know if Darl is crazy or even if his motivations were really wrong. In fact, he seems to understand why Darl may have burned the barn (233). However, he knows that Darl did wrong and would have to pay for his mistake, but he shows some mercy that is not seen in Jewel, Dewey Dell, Vardamen, and especially Anse.

I have tried to paint Cash as a man of substance and character. I believe that he becomes a rally point for his family. However, just as his qualities exemplify his positive nature, they could easily be construed as negative, especially his pragmatism. Cash is fairly inflexible. The most poignant example of this is the situation which arises after Darl burns the barn down. I assume it could be argued that he should have defended his brother and not let him be convicted so easily. Perhaps he should have refused to let the men haul Darl away. Unfortunately, his nature was that Darl did wrong and because he is such an oddity, it may be the best thing for him. His pragmatic ways also avoid the big swings a family may encounter. Although he may cut some losses, he also would avoid having any large gains. This side of Cash could be interpretated as somewhat dark. He seems to adhere to the community standard, he becomes the social order in the family. I think he feels as though he is doing the right thing, therefor is not dark. His inflexibility can be looked at both ways, I choose to assume in this family s case it is a definite positive.

Cash is a character who is unique. He embodies the qualities we like in a person. He is strong and appears to be intelligent. He seems to posses a logic that is missing in all the rest of the characters in this novel. I have already discussed the specific qualities that makes Cash the patriarchal center of his family; courage, diligence, and pragmatism. However, we need to realize that he is the only figure who has compassion and real understanding of people. For example, he understands Darl s actions, Anse s slow moving ways (259), Vernon s possessiveness of his mules, and Jewels hard work at night to buy his horse. The makeup of Cash s personality and person give him the ability to head his family. It is Cash who is the motor that gets things done in the novel. It is as if the family is in a centrifuge and Cash creates the gravity that glues the group together. Cash, not Anse, is the true patriarch and leader of the family.