

FILM

As I Lay Dying (1930)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

fictional film adaptation from *Hollyworld* (2006)

When she heard it approaching, Sarah looked up through her sunglasses. She located it in the sky like a dragonfly out of the swamp, growing as large as a mutation until it passed whumping over her head with Ryan leaning out the open side doorway secured by straps and aiming his big camera down at the cotton-field. When he pointed down at her, she cued the two young men in overalls waiting at the edge of the field.

Here they came, walking a path in single file straight through the cotton, the shorter one in the lead. They reached the old cotton house in the center of the field and the leader followed one of the paths around it while the taller boy stepped through a window and in a moment emerged out the other side without missing a stride and now in the lead as the two continued in single file along the path across the cotton field. The Eisleys had amused people in Hollywood when the news appeared in the trade papers that they were going to film a series of interior monologues on location with a cast of unknown local people, not only with no stars but with no professional actors.

They transported their equipment across the southwest from Los Angeles in a caravan, Ryan driving the first van with Sarah and his secretary Lily Dooch so they could go over the script while they traveled, Tom their sound technician driving the second van and then Davin driving the camera boom truck. They would have preceded themselves with ads in newspapers around the state of Mississippi, but due to racial tensions at the time, as intruders with cameras they decided to maintain as low a profile as they could, renting a bed and breakfast owned by an elderly Daughter of the Confederacy who hobbled around using a cane and regaled them with anecdotes, out of town on the road from Oxford to Memphis. Glass cases in her entry hall displayed squashed Minie balls and maps and tattered flags and other relics of the Civil War. For a month, they drove all over the state looking for interesting faces, taping voices, passing out business cards and taking phone numbers. At night they studied their photos and tapes, while Lily took notes. Tom recorded frogs and locusts and boots sucking through mud and other atmospherics for the sound track. There would be no music to interfere with what Sarah wanted to be as pure an experience of the novel as possible.

One balmy evening, between two stately columns on the veranda of Rowan Oak, they sat in rocking chairs and sipped bourbon with the Faulkners. Sarah gazed out the long shady driveway lined with cedars, straight and peaceful, evoking a sense of order and tradition. She loved the fragrance of magnolia trees. The former plantation mansion had been restored to antebellum elegance as a visible sign that through his writing William Faulkner had tried to redeem its history.

The seating arrangement of two pairs of rockers implicitly enforced a separation of the genders, he and Estelle at a formal distance from and half facing each other and Sarah naturally sitting in the rocker beside Estelle, a fragile little belle with short gray hair coifed in a style popular during the twenties. Faulkner wore a gray tweed jacket with frayed cuffs and holes in the elbows, his white hair cut short and his white mustache curling upward at the ends, white as cotton but trim and neat like careful paintbrush strokes, such a softspoken and humble southern gentleman, so courteous and frail that Sarah felt all the more deeply that she wanted to do him justice. His thin face looked haggard and sad, his eyes hooded at the outside corners by lids that seemed to droop from the lifelong burden of vision, yet at times they twinkled and his face crinkled up in heartfelt good humor, especially after she gave him a paperback he had not seen exploiting a movie that had gutted one of his novels. Sarah felt a rush of elation when he laughed at the cover photo showing movie stars locked in a passionate kiss that in the novel would have been incestuous, though the reprinted excerpt inside had nothing to do with them and was entirely about an idiot eloping with a cow.

Over twenty years ago when desperate for money, Faulkner left Estelle behind and went to Hollywood. He wrote a little for Metro Goldwyn Mayer, served as a creative handyman to Howard Hawks and then got a contract from Warner Brothers at about the same time that Ryan got laid off there as an assistant director and moved on to 20th Century Fox. They talked about mutual acquaintances. Faulkner claimed that he did not know how to write for movies and had aspired only to write for Mickey Mouse, but he had failed. He did not take movies seriously enough to care that Hollywood had so butchered and mocked his novels in their adaptations, most recently at Fox, that it put the nation to shame, especially in France, affecting Sarah like hearing Bach played by an amnesiac on a kazoo, provoking her to undertake this project of redemption. Faulkner knew enough about the movie business to expect nothing. He had refused publicity appearances to promote movies adapted from his work and when she pushed her glasses up higher on her nose and questioned him about the Bundren family, he pretended to have forgotten their story.

He left the picture entirely up to them, generous and reticent, drawing on his pipe and calling her Miz Eisley in his soft warm gently inflected Mississippi drawl. Sensing that she and Ryan were estranged, he deferred in his manner to her independence. He preferred well chosen words to pictures and nodded to her mostly while Ryan rocked back and lit a cigar with the lighter given to him by Marilyn Monroe. They were discussing southern recipes when a loud crash startled them! Upstairs in the house, a male voice started ranting. Sarah wondered if it could be his mentally disturbed stepson. Ignoring the distraction, always graceful and courteous, Faulkner set aside his pipe and invited them off to the paddock to meet his horse Tempy.

Sarah and Ryan had separate bedrooms upstairs in the old lady's house outside Oxford. They worked together with Lily downstairs in a back sitting room, at a large oak table where they spread out their snapshots and Ryan's sketches for the storyboard. They set up a screen to watch rushes there and Lily arranged to have their film processed at a lab up the road in Memphis. Ryan hired local technicians and a crew. Casting gave Sarah headaches, because the most interesting voices did not match the most interesting faces. Ryan teased her about being such a purist and pointed out that the characters were not real in the first place and she asked him how he knew they were not based on real people.

When he said they could dub the best voices over the best faces, she accepted that, though she worried about integration.

Ryan suggested that Davin play Cash Bundren, but Davin did not want to be an actor. Sarah felt relieved by that. She always felt relieved when she did not have to disagree with Ryan, who tended in argument to walk straight through the cotton house. She tried to stay objective and faithful to the story in casting, though she could not help but think of her own mother when she selected the farm wife to play Addie Bundren. She should have known better than to let Ryan cast Dewey Dell that day she had a flat tire, but they were getting along so well and the girl looked all right for the part. Her greatest regret was that when they assigned faces to the characters, giving specific form to figures of imagination rendered by their thoughts, they lost some of their universality, in particular racial ambiguity, the possibility at the outset that the Bundren family is black.

They picked a cotton farm with a dilapidated house, abandoned long ago, to serve as the Bundren place. Sarah wore slacks, with boots and a safari jacket like Ryan. She had lost some weight since he saw her last, and had her hair done. She felt better than she had in years. Working so closely with him again, she tried to set aside her grievances and hurts in their common dedication to the film. They were like old friends. They walked the farm discussing camera setups and looking through the viewfinders attached to cords around their necks. He lost the finder she gave him for their anniversary when he was in Venice and had to pick up another one. After a few disagreements, he told her to go ahead and call the shots. He had never done that before. Their give and take had always been a kind of dance with him leading, but this time, he let her select the camera setups and even instruct the novice actors. He let her direct. She told him exactly what was needed to be true and faithful and he selected the appropriate lens from his black leather lens case lined with red velvet, pulling it out carefully from its sheath. Now and then, after a good day, he visited her bedroom for a nightcap.

They photographed in black and white using natural light. Ryan shot the opening inside the shack with a handheld camera, from the perspective of Addie Bundren, lying on his back on a squeaky old box springs and filming the sky through the window above and behind his head, dingy glass with quartering crosspieces of dry old splintery wood. From this angle, in a slow zoom upward the window frame expanded out of the picture, leaving only a cross in the sky. They would overlay footage of vultures circling, appearing to garland the top of the cross like a crown of thorns. As the slow zoom continues upward, the cross blurs away, leaving only the vultures circling in a pale sky. Inside the ragged circle of gliding dark wings, the title appears in simple black lettering, *As I Lay Dying*.

Dissolve to the perspective of a circling vulture, looking down on the cottonfield quartered by paths that intersect in a path around the cotton house at the center. Seen from above, the field turns slowly like a wheel, rolling through cosmic time as two small figures move away from the hub along one spoke. The shadow of the vulture darkens them. Jump cut down to the two young men in overalls coming along the path through the cotton as the shadow passes over them, the tall one in front wearing a torn straw hat and looking intently straight ahead and the shorter one behind looking up into the sky. Tight closeup of Darl looking up, squinting into the sun, then ahead again with a poetic face partially concealed by pale hair with eyes so sensitive that he may be insane,

following his taller brother Jewel in the torn hat, the two plodding on through the cotton as the voiceover begins to narrate Darl's thoughts about his dying mother.

The rasp and gasp of a saw grows louder as they climb a hill to the old farmhouse with smoke wisping up from the chimney and their brother Cash kneeling in front, building a coffin. The saw rasps in the background as the camera follows Darl into the house and the bedroom of his mother Addie, where solemn neighbor women are paying their last respects. Tight closeup of Cora Tull, an aloof woman with a superior air whose audible thoughts expose a petty rivalry with Addie at baking and salvation, her face exuding a smug anticipation of her rival's death. The camera slowly pulls back from Cora and returns to Darl.

The tortured expression on Darl's face indicates that he is looking down at his mother, who is as yet unseen by the camera. He retreats onto the back porch where Pa sits with his neighbor Vernon Tull, while the rasp of the saw and the chuck of an adze alternate in the background, growing louder when Darl is in close-up, driving him out of his mind. Pa resembles the comical Percy Kilbride, who played Pa in the popular *Ma and Pa Kettle* movie series, the lazy slow-talking little husband of the domineering raucous farm wife played by Marjorie Main. This Pa has no teeth. Anse Bundren claims another disability as well, that he has toxic sweat that will kill him if he works. Darl dips a gourd into the water bucket and drinks, then flings the rest to the ground and wipes his mouth on his sleeve, gazing into the distance at Jewel in deep focus down the hill. Jewel approaches a skittish horse in the pasture. He grabs it by the nostrils, wrestles violently with its head, swings up onto its back and gallops out of sight.

Fade from the bright panoramic shot to the dark interior of a horse stall in the barn with sunlight glaring through cracks and Jewel fighting with the horse in a blur of flying mane and rolling eyes and fists while his voiceover rages at Cash for building her coffin so close to the house that she can hear it, an outburst of fiercely protective devotion to his mother, shot with an unstable handheld camera using canted frames and a distorting lens. The horse is squealing, kicking the wall!

Jewel kicks the animal in the stomach and the horse arches its neck with bared teeth!

Jewel slugs the horse in the jaw! He jumps up onto the trough and drags an armload of hay down from the rack into the trough between his legs and shouts.

"Eat! *Eat*, you sweet son of a bitch!"

Cut to the back porch.

"It's three dollars for a load of wood," Darl tells Pa.

"What if she don't last?" Pa rubs his knees. "I promised her my word. I don't wanta disappoint her."

"Sho," Vernon says. He spits over the rail. "She'll hold on."

"Then we can take her to town."

"Ma ain't that sick!" Jewel snaps. "*Shut up*, Darl!"

Darl looks askance at Jewel with a devious calm.

"I promised my word," Pa says. "I promised me and the boys would get her there quick as mules can walk it."

"You're just burning in hell to get her there, ain't you," Jewel says in his harsh savage voice.

Pa rubs his knees, "It be her wish to lie in Jefferson."

"It means three dollars," Darl says again. "Do you want us to go or not? We'll be back by tomorrow sundown."

"She made me promise my word."

"Come on!" Jewel lunges down the steps.

"By sundown now," Pa says. "Don't keep her a'waitin'."

Jewel and Darl climb up onto the wagon seat and the mules pull them down the hill. The saw rasps back and forth.

Tight closeup of Cora Tull expressing her thoughts in the voiceover, seeing Addie as a lonely woman, proud and unloved except by her favorite child Darl. Cora blames Pa for making poor sweet Darl leave his dying mother to go fetch wood, for refusing to bury Addie in the Bundren family plot and for planning to cart her away instead forty miles to town.

Addie's daughter Dewey Dell is picking cotton in a field with an ardent young fellow named Lafe, a pretty teenager with tangled blonde hair in soft focus, telling herself that if her bag is full by the time she picks to the woods at the end of the row, it will not be her fault, it will be that she cannot help it. It will be that she had to do it all the time. They pick on down the row, touching hands and looking into each other's eyes and Lafe starts picking into her sack, rapidly. So it is not her fault. Canted frames gradually tilt them into the shady woods. After they are out of sight, leaves rustle, twigs snap, Dewey Dell moans and gasps and the camera rocks. Then all is calm. Her voiceover resumes, out of breath, saying that her bag was full and she could not help it.

Cut to Dewey Dell sitting beside the bed of her mother, fanning her, thinking of how Darl knows about her and Lafe. She hates him for knowing. He knows that she wants Ma to die so they can go to town. He knows that Ma is going to die before they get back with the wood so that Jewel cannot be there at her side, because she loves Jewel best. Just then, portly Doc Peabody enters the room carrying his black bag.

"So he has wore her out at last," he murmurs.

"I been helping her stay cool," Dewey Dell fans faster.

Vultures circle overhead in a gloomy sky.

Jewel in his torn hat and Darl bareheaded hunch on the rolling wagon pulled by mules that smoke in the rain. Slow zoom into a tight closeup of Darl's pale eyes that appear to be staring beyond this world as rain slicks down his hair.

He imagines her room, fluid looking at first as if underwater, shot through gauze and an ointment smeared on the lens, then gradually becoming clear. Pa is standing beside her bed. Clinging to his leg and peering around it the little boy Vardaman, youngest in the family, has a round face with big eyes, a little hole for a mouth and hair like birds slept in it. Dewey Dell sits fanning her. They all stare at Addie in the bed with her face off camera. Dewey Dell says it is Jewel she wants. Tight closeup of Pa's rough hand fumbling onto hers, her fingers like gnarled roots. Vardaman peers around Pa's leg with frog eyes.

Cut to shocking first shot of Addie Bundren. Her gray hair is all fanned out around her head on the pillow and her bronzed wrinkly face with cheekbones humped is gaunt and exhausted and sinking toward the ultimate depth, looking at Pa with all her remaining life

draining into her eyes as she listens to him explain that Jewel and Darl went to fetch a load of wood. They thought there was time, that she would wait for them. Addie stuns them all by abruptly raising herself from the pillow! Dewey Dell gasps and leans over, trying to press her back. Addie looks out the window at Cash, still working into the twilight. She shouts his name, her voice surprisingly harsh and strong. Cash drops the saw and lifts the board for her to see, then gestures toward the planks on the ground. He pantomimes the finished box as he says to himself, Folks has gotten away from the olden right teaching that says to drive the nails down good and trim the edges well, like it was for your own comfort you was making it.

Addie sighs back onto her pillow with a gaspy rattle in her throat. She turns her head and looks at Vardaman, double exposed on the hub of a wagon-wheel, turning in the mud with Vardaman's face at the end of one spoke. Then all her children face her narrowed into spokes and the camera turns around her with the wheel of her children as Addie expands fluidly through them like a spirit and becomes the rim as well as the hub. The last of her flares up in her eyes for an instant before the wheel fades.

She is gone.

Fade to the wagon tilted steeply into a muddy ditch with a broken wheel, the spokes shattered.

"You *kilt* her!" Vardaman shrieks at Doc.

The child is backing slowly away from the bed with mouth wide open and eyes round, backing faster out the door.

"Ma! *Ma!*" Dewey Dell throws herself across the knees of her mother, grabbing and shaking her with the fan still clutched in one hand beating against the quilt.

"Durn them boys," says Pa.

Jewel is up to his ankles in mud with hat drooping limp from the rain, prying with a post at the axle.

"Jewel," says Darl. "She's dead, Jewel."

Pa pulls Dewey Dell away.

Cash comes in and lights a candle, then stands, light colored hair darkened by rain, slicked down across his scalp, looking at his mother from a calm squared face with his hands gripped tightly in front of him. Pa shys around for awhile and rubs his thigh, then gently, he touches her cheek. He tries to smooth the quilt over her but only disarranges it more. Finally he gives up and straightens himself, rubbing his thigh and backing away. Cash goes back outside. The saw begins to rasp again.

Pa pulls out a bit of snuff and pushes it into his mouth, working it against his toothless gums.

"God's will be done," he says. "Now I can get them teeth."

Doc Peabody attends the corpse.

Vardaman runs away as fast as he can go, fleeing the house, his little feet splashing through puddles.

That night Vernon Tull helps to nail the coffin together. Then he helps Pa and Cash and Doc carry the finished box into the house, thinking about how Darl just thinks by himself too much is his trouble. The brain can't stand too much racking. In the morning, Pa finds the window open and rain blowing in on the coffin. The lid is bored full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in one. Pa says to himself that Vardaman must be afraid that she can't breathe. He calls for Cash to come in.

They take off the lid.

Addie lies upsidedown in the box to accommodate the flared bottom of her wedding dress, with a hole bored into her forehead and another into her cheek.

Vernon and Cora Tull in their buggy come rolling along beside a stretch of the levee like a wasteland. Cora is singing, raising her voice in celebration of her celestial reward. They pass Vardaman sitting at the edge of the slough, fishing.

"Ain't no fish in there," says Vernon.

Fade to Vardaman going down to the spring under the trees. He squats like a devotee at the Ganges, peering down into the water. Cut to him struggling this way up the hill, all wet and carrying a muddy fish nearly as long as himself. He staggers with it into the kitchen and pushes it up flopping into the sink, his face amazed and proud as he stands there panting at the tail showing over the edge of the chipped porcelain.

He sits down on the back porch beside his Pa.

"My mother is a fish," he says in awe.

Pa looks aside at him like that sounds reasonable.

Dewey Dell stands at the kitchen drainboard, cutting up the fish. She ain't like Ma. She ain't going to work herself to death for them. She stabs and chops it with the knife! She will not do nothing for them no more! She hacks it to pieces! Now it is Doc Peabody's fault, because he could help her if he just would, if she could just tell him.

"You *kilt* her!"

Vardaman is standing in the doorway staring at her. She stops herself panting, holding the knife in the air. In the bedroom, Doc Peabody covers the holes in the face with a black veil.

Cash sits outside on a front porch step, fashioning wooden pegs to fill the holes bored in the lid as Reverend Whitfield approaches in haste, riding over the hill on a frothing horse all splattered with mud. Pa grabs his reins. The minister dismounts, half covered with mud. Pa tells him that he is too late and the reverend looks oddly relieved. Neighbors are arriving in horse-drawn carriages and wagons. Led by the minister, the Tulls and other mourners gather inside around Addie in the coffin. They sing hymns, mostly high female voices, while Vardaman hides in the barn whispering to a horse that they are going to eat his mother.

Slow dissolve to vultures soaring in a dawn sky, more of them than yesterday, overlapping circles. Cut to the wagon seen from the rear with the pale coffin visible in the bed, pulled away from the shack by a pair of mules, their ears bobbing down the hill and onto the tracks worn into the dirt along beside the cottonfield. Closeup of the left rear wagon-wheel rolling slowly through the mud, pulling back to a ground level shot following the wagon from this extremely low angle behind the left rear wheel. Early sunlight bursts through the spokes as they slowly turn, the figures in the wagon elevated now into the sky and magnified, Pa humped on the seat, jerking the reins, with Dewey Dell beside him, Cash in back holding on to the coffin with Darl and Vardaman. Above them with his head in the sky topped by the torn hat, Jewel rides his horse along beside the wagon like a military escort, his bearing stiff and proud.

They pass the cemetery where the Bundrens are buried.

"You all *kilt* her!" Vardaman starts up again.

"She ain't balanced yet," Cash adjusts the position of the coffin.

Jewel curses Darl.

"You know," Cash spits over the wheel, "in a couple days now, she will be smellin' real bad."

"You might tell Jewel that," Darl says.

"Goddamn you too, Darl!"

A gob of mud flies up from the wheel and plops onto the coffin. Cash leans forward, takes a tool from his box and removes the desecration. He reaches out of the wagon and grabs at a low-hanging branch--snapping off a twig of leaves--then he scours at the stain with the leaves until the wood looks clean.

They stop for the night at the farm of a neighbor who gives them dinner and offers them beds, but Pa is too proud to accept so much charity and they sleep outside, in and under the wagon. At first light, they are up and rolling on. After a montage of shots over the rear wheel conveying them along over hill and cotton-field, the camera stops following them. We watch the wagon get smaller as it rolls on into the distance, with Jewel prancing along beside it and vultures wheeling overhead.

From his front porch, Vernon Tull sits watching the wagon pass. He finally goes over and hitches up his mule and rides after the Bundrens, puzzled as to why they are trying to get to town with all the bridges out. At the end of the levee he catches up. The river, less than a hundred yards across, is over its banks, the bridge has been swept to pieces by the flood and just the two ends are in sight above the raging muddy water. Pa is hunched on the wagon seat, at a loss. Jewel yells at Vernon to get the hell out of here! But then, after prancing around, he decides they can use Vernon's mule to help the wagon ford the river.

Vernon refuses.

"My mule ain't going into that water," I say.

Pa tells Dewey Dell and Vardaman to get out of the wagon. He climbs down from the seat. Cash takes the reins with Darl beside him while Pa wades into the river, looking for a way across. Dewey Dell follows him with a lunch basket over one arm and a package in the other and Vardaman follows her. Just as soon as Vernon sees the little boy up to his armpits in the current, he jumps in splashing after him and grabs him by the hand, lifting and helping him to make his way across. On the other side, the four of them stand on the levee and look back across the flood at the wagon behind the mules, rocking down the embankment of trees and cane into the river, with Jewel leading the way on his horse like a general. Cash looks back around at the coffin and worries that it won't balance. On the other side, Vernon waves at them urgently, waving them further downstream.

Led by Jewel, however, the mules plod ahead into the water as Darl thinks of how his mother always favored Jewel and when he was a baby held him on a pillow in her lap. Cash replies to his brother, telepathic, adding a detail to his thoughts. As the current rises around them roaring louder than the shouts of the men, the mules look around at them with a wild despair. Cash reaches back and grabs the coffin with one hand, then he leans and pushes his tool box further under the seat. The wagon starts rocking as the mules snort in fear and struggle against the current.

Cash throws a rope to Jewel, who wraps it around his saddle horn--but his horse slips and sinks half under, then surges to its feet again as the current lifts the wagon in long and undulating waves, plunging and diving with sinister volition and a sudden volume that lifts them like flotsam into the path of debris that contains a big log! Jewel's horse struggles to pull them on past it out of the way but a mule goes under dragging the other with him and the wagon tilts to roll downstream as the log impacts it!--tipping it all the

way up with Cash half turned so the reins jerk from his hand and disappear into the water! He reaches back to the coffin and holds her jammed against the high side of the wagon and yells to Darl to jump clear but he will not as the head of one mule emerges with its eyes wide and Jewel urges his horse around to help! The legs of the mules roll up stiff and over and on downstream pulling the wagon around so the log scrapes free and goes on but the coffin slides out and the wagon tips over with Cash and Jewel and the horse plunging under in a tangle! When they come up, Cash is hanging on to the saddle being dragged by the horse, Jewel is braced in the current holding on to the rope so the wagon cannot get away and Darl is a bobbing head. Vardaman runs along the bank screaming at Darl to catch her! *Catch her!* Until the horse comes splashing to the bank and kicks loose from Cash, who sinks in the water face down.

Darl trudges up the bank, panting out of breath with Vardaman beside him hysterical.

Darl didn't save her! He let her go! On the high ground, Cash is lying where Vernon dragged him up, his head tipped back, his leg bloody and his shoulders held up by the arms of Dewey Dell in an arrangement that evokes paintings of the descent of Christ from the cross. He lies pole thin in his wet clothes with his thin hair plastered in a smear across his head and a thread of vomit running from the corner of his mouth. Dewey Dell wipes it away with the hem of her dress.

Jewel comes up with Cash's hammer.

"Vernon just found the level," he says, looking down at Cash. "Ain't he talked yet? He can tell us what else there was."

They return to the river.

Jewel and Darl recover the wagon, haul it up the bank and chock the wheels. Alone then, Jewel wades downstream and retrieves the coffin. He and Pa lift it up into the wagon again. Vernon is up to his shoulders in the current where the wagon tipped, at the end of a rope tied to a tree. His head goes under. When he comes up again with head streaming, blowing water, he has found the saw and he holds it up high to show the family. Awed by their cooperation, Darl sees each tool recovered in slow motion and close up in glowing soft focus, as a sacred object. We take turns diving at the end of the rope, looking for tools.

We all help.

"Look here, Cash," we say, holding up his tools so he can see them. "What else did you have?"

Cash turns his head and vomits.

Dewey Dell wipes his mouth with the hem of her dress so he can finally gather himself and speak.

"It wasn't on a balance," he says.

Cutaway to flashback closeup of Cora Tull, still looking down on Addie as unloved, a vain woman who did not attain salvation, even though Brother Whitfield, a godly man if

ever one breathed God's breath, had prayed for her and wrestled and strove with her spirit. Closeup of the clock-shaped coffin, the wider upper part where the head is supposed to be, a take long enough to recall that Addie was put in there upsidedown. Then the camera pans down to the foot of the coffin and turns around and focuses on the lower portion where her head actually is, moving in so close that the wood grain resembles the currents of a river and the grain of the wagon-wheel, with her face and hair growing out in viney tendrils curling from the hub and through the spokes into the rim, as her weary voiceover sums up her life.

Dissolve to young Addie as a teacher in a rustic country school classroom, her perspective revealed in a slow pan of the poorly dressed students, various ages and heights, yawning and scratching and looking around and talking, faces that to her look unaware, snot-nosed and selfish. A boy is pulling the hair of the girl sitting in front of him. Addie comes down the aisle and stands with her switch. She looks down at the boy, who evades her eyes with defiant resentment. She pulls the boy out of his seat by an arm and drags him up to the front of the class and grabs his neck and bends him over and beats his behind and legs and arms until he bleeds from cuts and the class is paying attention!

When school is out, she goes down the hill and sits by the spring with sunlight filtering down through the trees, isolated and lonely, her fingers digging into the earth, her fingers like roots, then in bed at night hearing geese overhead, their honking wild and high out of the wild darkness.

So she took Anse.

He had a house and a farm and he came to her in his Sunday clothes, stooping with hat in hand. Then she had Cash, but was disappointed. She felt duped by words like motherhood and love, so that when she had Darl it was a dirty trick and she took revenge on Anse by making him promise to cart her all the way to Jefferson when she died. She waited for the preacher in the woods, then afterward she had Jewel and her wild blood boiled away. She gave Anse a daughter to compensate for Jewel, then gave him Vardaman too for good measure. Then, she murmurs, I could get ready to die. Cora believed that I was blind to sin, that I was not a true mother, wanting me to kneel and pray with her, because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too.

Reverend Whitfield stands tall in his long black frock coat delivering a sermon with the oratory of an exhorting saddlebag evangelist, recounting his trials on his journey to the bedside of the dying woman, how he had wrestled thigh to thigh with Satan and emerged victorious, how he woke to the enormity of his sin and prayed to God and was told that he must confess his sin aloud. God said it is for them, for that deceived husband to forgive you, not I. He thanked the Lord for washing out the bridge with a flood and for bearing him safely across to his Gethsemane, but when he arrived at her bedside, he found that she was already dead. Praise to Thee, O Lord! Cutaway flashback to the crowded death room with Addie upsidedown in her open coffin, wearing a small dark letter A embroidered into the trim at her bosom. Praise the Lord! He is merciful! He will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though he was not there! Slow pullback from the pulpit shows Whitfield raising his arms to heaven with his eyes tightly shut, revealing that he is alone in the church.

Pa swaps Jewel's beloved horse for a team of mules and the wagon rolls on under circling vultures, Cash stretched out on top of the coffin with a hand on his tool box and Jewel walking along behind. Cash allowed them to set his broken leg in concrete so as not to delay their progress, but now he is very sick. As they roll on, their thoughts reveal that not only does Pa want teeth, Vardaman wants a train, Cash wants a phonograph, Dewey Dell wants an abortion and Darl just wants to get rid of the body. They pass through a hamlet and people on the street make faces and turn away clutching handkerchiefs to their noses. They stop for the night at a farm where the stinking wagon is closed into a barn and the vultures start walking around, even into the house.

Darl sets fire to the barn.

Vardaman screams the alarm, Pa rescues the mules and Jewel runs straight into the raging flames and pulls out the wagon in a nimbus of sparks, burning his back, saving his mother once again. Slow dissolve to their arrival, finally, in Jefferson. People on the street, white and black, gasp in disgust at the odor and call it an outrage. Outside the house of a relative, the Bundrens sit in the wagon, the dizzying stench, while Pa goes inside for a long while and finally comes out with two shovels. Cut to the town cemetery where at last, vultures perched in the trees, they bury her quickly and without ceremony. Jewel shovels deep with his back greased and ruddy through the char and Darl shovels fast. The spokesman is Cash, audibly in pain, lying in the wagon bed looking on, the concrete by now broken off and his exposed leg black and oozing. I ain't so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he ain't. Sometimes I think it ain't none of us pure crazy and ain't none of us pure sane til the balance of us talks him that-a-way, but I don't reckon nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his stock.

Leaving in the wagon through the cemetery gate, they are stopped by a man in a white medical jacket with an ambulance nearby. Dewey Dell pounces on Darl from the wagon seat like a wildcat and rides his back until they fall onto Cash's leg. Jewel helps his sister wrestle their brother out of the wagon onto the ground, she clawing and scratching him until the man in white has to pull her off! Jewel and Pa try to hold him down!

Darl fights back!

"Kill him!" Jewel yells. "Kill the son of a bitch!"

Darl is pinned on his back, looking up at Cash lying on the wagon, "I thought *you* would have told me."

"This will be better for you," Cash says. "For all of us."

"*Better?*" Darl begins to laugh.

Gasping in his pain, Cash says to himself, It's like there is a fellow in every man that's done past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and astonishment.

Cut to a closeup of Darl looking out through the bars on a window. Pullback shows that he is on a train and his voiceover that he is headed for the state mental asylum. He laughs in his madness, looking out through the bars at what is left of his family waiting on the wagon in the town square, near the Civil War monument. Hunched on the wagon like apes, they are eating bananas from a paper bag. Vardaman has his toy train, Cash has his phonograph and Dewey Dell has a smile on her face. Jewel has bandages wrapped around his torso and Cash is stretched out with his leg properly set.

Flashback to Cash in the office of Doc Peabody.

"God Almighty," says Doc to Cash. "Why didn't Anse carry you to the nearest sawmill and stick your leg in the saw? That would have cured it. Then you all could have stuck his head into the saw and cured a whole family!"

Anse returns to the wagon escorting a duck-shaped woman all dressed up in a fancy hat. Dewey Dell, Jewel and Vardaman stare at them. Cash raises himself on his elbows, describing the sight in voiceover. Darl watches through the bars. Anse has gotten his new teeth as well as a shave and his hair is combed down wet and slick. He looks taller without his stoop, holding his head up carrying her grip, hangdog shy yet proud too. Anse Bundren looks like a new man. He introduces her to his family with their banana peels dangling, the new woman with hard protruding eyes like she is daring ere a man to say nothing.

"Meet the new Mrs. Bundren," he says.

An aerial shot pulls back slowly into the sky until the figures in the square diminish to the size of Anse.

3

That night it began to rain again.

Davin Easley sat waiting in the cab of the camera boom truck, held up by traffic at a washout along a country road with rain deluging his windshield, too much for the big wipers.

He had to pull up the hood of his yellow slicker and stick his head out into the storm to see ahead. For weeks they had been delayed until finally his dad got his last shots and had the picture in the can as he said and they packed up and moved out in caravan for the long trek to Los Angeles. Lily Dooch the birdlike secretary in glasses had left in a rental car for the film lab in Memphis and would fly back home from there. When the rain eased up for a moment, through the rear window of the equipment van ahead of him he could see Tom the audio technician driving and in the passenger seat beside him Dewey Dell.

The rain fell in sheets and gusts against his windshield and his dad came ducking from the farmhouse in his hooded yellow slicker and talked to Tom in the second van. They had begun shooting early in the Spring, hoping to avoid this, but got caught by flooding anyway. His dad was in a rush now, overdue back at the Universal studio to start another picture. As he came ducking this way, splashing through puddles, Davin rolled his window down and the rain pelted into his face.

"There's another detour!" his dad yelled. His handsome face, always a golden tan and nearly always cheerful, had turned serious under the drooping yellow hood, his mustache dripping as he yelled. "This would take us forever to reach the bridge! We're turning off! I hired a river barge! Stay close now!"

"Okay, Dad!"

He had interrupted his studies at Berkeley to help them with this film mostly for his mother, she wanted it so much, though he loved working on a set with his dad. He often thought of him as Ryan now because people called him that on the set and his dad liked the informality. He could not remember his biological father Burke Hanson, who split from his mother three years after his birth, then joined the Marines after the attack on

Pearl Harbor and almost got killed fighting on Okinawa. Ryan Eisley had a golden glow, his shoulders and forehead gleamed in the sun and his trim blond hair crowned his head in gentle waves. For as long as he could remember, Davin had loved Ryan as his father, in awe of his personality and accomplishments. His dad could dance and sing and fix things. He seemed to know how to do everything. In later years, though, he came home less often, withdrawing from the family into his career. He lived alone now, except for servants, in a big white mansion in Beverly Hills.

They started moving again.

Ahead in the stormy darkness, a deputy in a raincoat swung a flashlight, directing the line of traffic onto a side road, a muddy path into the blackness. Davin turned the big wheel and followed the two vans west into the dark, leaning forward and squinting to see through the torrent blurring his windshield. At places, he had to plow through water pouring over the road, more than a foot deep at times, with potholes. Trees and houses alongside the road were standing in a flood of swift currents. They came to lights at a dock that seemed to be floating on a vast black expanse of water moving fast, with a few lights scattered over it in the far distance. The rushing tumultuous roar sounded like all the waters of the continent were funneling down around them, overflowing all channels to the Gulf. Davin followed the vans out onto the long dock, then up the ramp onto the Mississippi River barge.

An old barge man directed them where to park.

They got out of the vehicles and ran to the cover of a brightly lit cabin, then went inside. They took off their slickers, hung them up and sat down at a table. The room smelled of wet clothes and hot coffee. Tom and Dewey Dell sat beside each other on one side, oddly separate in their behavior for a couple who said they fell in love on the set. The grizzled old barge man in a wet cap brought each of them coffee in paper cups.

Davin watched his parents talk as they sipped their coffee. He had never seen them work so closely together on a set before, like partners, side by side looking through their viewfinders. They were a team again, except that for the first time, he let her be the director too, so they could be more faithful to the script. He crawled around through the mud and got himself into the most uncomfortable positions to give her the shots that she wanted. He really put his heart into it. Now he set aside his coffee and started filling out forms, signing papers, talking to the barge man about the flooding around Memphis and worrying that the negative and rough cut of the film could expand in the humidity or be damaged by water before Lily got them to the airport, leaving only the one good print in a sealed container in their equipment van. His mother sat holding her coffee in both hands to warm them, her dark hair mussed by the hood of her slicker. She sat there at the table with a loose plume of hair standing up on her head that gave her an endearingly vulnerable look. Her face went slack at the thought of the film getting damaged.

Davin had grown up hearing their verbal fights after they thought he and his sister Karen were asleep. They frightened him, their drinking gave him nightmares, yet they were so generous and good to him that, loving them both, he forgave them everything, as they did him. Ryan got things done in such a lighthearted and ingratiating way, he was amazing really. He could stride right through the cotton house or charm his way around it. Davin disliked his infidelities and hated the suffering of his mother, yet he could not hate his father. He could not see his infidelities as fatal, they almost seemed part of his job, and because he could see how much Ryan loved and needed his mother, he always

believed that somehow they would get back together and overcome their differences, like now.

A ship's bell startled him!

Then horns and shouts as the barge man ran out the door. They all jumped up from the table. They rushed to the steamed windows and wiped spots clear and peered out into the dark. Davin felt a disconnection and a sense of loss, like swinging free into the perils of the flood. He looked to see how his mother was doing. The grizzled old barge man in the wet cap stuck his head back in through the door and yelled.

"She busted loose!"

They grabbed their slickers, bumping and spilling coffee, and rushed outside into the rain. The barge had begun to swing around parallel with the current, already floating away downriver from the tugboat dragging its broken towline. Davin squinted through the rain at the lights along the bridge ahead and the black expanse of water sliding along with ominous mass and volition littered by floating objects barely visible. A chicken coop squawked past them in the dark, then the bridge lights rose overhead and the understructure loomed high and they were swept along straight toward a towering gray abutment obstructed by debris and the current lifted as the barge rode crunching up onto the mass of tangled bare tree limbs! With a lurch, they hung up there--all holding on with Dewey Dell screaming! The barge tilted left at such a steep angle the camera boom truck toppled over the side like a toy and disappeared, then the equipment van rolled over, crashing and smashing as it rolled down the slope until it hung out over the current, snagged on the rail by a rear wheel.

Davin tore off his slicker.

"No, Davin! *No!*" his mother screamed as he started making his way down the slanting deck--"*Davin!*"

"Your film!" he grabbed a fire hose for a safety line.

"It's not worth it! Come *back!*"

The equipment van screeched further over the side, hung up on the rail. Ryan appeared with a rope and slid down the deck to Davin on the seat of his wet yellow slicker.

"Tie it around you!"

When they got ends of the rope tied around their waists, Ryan started on down but Davin grabbed his arm. He patted his dad's paunch through his slicker and before he could be denied he slid away down to the rail, leaving Ryan no choice but to be his anchor. He climbed over the rail and hung on to it like a jungle gym bar above the current. Ryan got his feet braced, gathered up the slack rope and wrapped it around a post and held it taut, unwrapping it slowly as Davin lowered himself to the locked rear doors upsidedown and a foot underwater. The old barge man passed down a lug wrench and Davin bent over and swung it down hard at the nearest window--*shattering the glass!* Water poured inside with a shrill din of screeching metal as the van slipped further down into the river. He used the wrench to break off all the remaining shards, then handed it back up to the barge man. The van dangled by a wheel.

"My lens case!" Ryan yelled.

"The tapes!" Tom shouted over the rail.

Davin dove in through the broken window.

Splashing around in the dark chaos of cables and tripods and cameras jumbled on the ceiling of the van he tried to find the film container. He unlatched and pushed open one rear door against the river and more water came flooding in around him. Struggling and gasping, he managed to get out and reach up and hand the lens case up to his dad. Then he gulped a breath and dove underwater and groped around and came upon the case of tapes. The current surged through the van as it screeched even lower, pulling a section of the rail shrieking down with it!

"Get out of there!" his dad yelled.

He handed the tapes up to Tom.

"Davin, *come on!*"

Gasping a deep breath, he dove again.

He groped through the violent darkness, thrown around inside by the current and running out of breath until at last he found the black film container on the far side of the pile and had to climb over junk to reach it, had to free it--*out of breath!*--and drag it by a handle madly struggling to get out and up for *air!* He lugged it to the surface like robbing a crypt, his arms by then too weak to lift it up. Tom climbed over and helped him raise it to the canting deck as the old barge man came haltingly down the slope with an armful of orange life jackets.

The tugboat hovered off the port side until, finally, the van ripped loose and screamed on over into the current, dragging off a section of railing like a snaky ladder biting the wheel.

It sank abruptly.

Then the tug approached and the pilot took them off the barge to safety on the west shore. After about an hour, the tug pulled the barge off the debris and they were able to recover one van. Tom would stay behind to salvage whatever he could and send the bill to Ryan, to pass on to his insurance company. They stopped at a motel nearby and when they opened the cases, they were relieved to find that nothing had been visibly damaged.

Before first light, Ryan knocked on the doors of their rooms. Tom and Dewey Dell parted outside the motel restaurant as if they barely knew each other and Davin noticed that it was Ryan who interested Dewey Dell. In the scene where Dewey Dell holds Cash in her arms like the Savior and he vomits, his mother told Ryan the girl looked more slutty than holy. Dewey Dell overheard her and turned sullen for awhile after that. Ryan draped her head with a dark shawl and used it to cover up her cleavage.

Now the four of them rode together, Davin in the backseat with Dewey Dell, who was about his age. She turned the other way from him and soon fell asleep with her head on a folded coat. At dawn they slowed down and passed through Texarkana with a huge red sun rising behind them, filtering light through giant trees and hanging moss. Around a few corners and over some railroad tracks, they had to stop for a wagon being pulled very slowly by a mule with its head down, a black man in overalls hunched on the seat as if just waking up, his reins drooping, not looking aside at them during the whole time it took the wagon to creak and rattle slowly through the intersection, leaving the street to chickens pecking around in the soft morning light.

They sped on, raising dust behind them.

As they hummed at a steady high speed across the flatlands of Texas the temperature rose. Heat rippled from the asphalt. They sealed themselves inside with air conditioning and Dewey Dell got bored enough to talk to Davin.

"Please don't call me Dewey Dell, my name is Paula." She corrected him with a smile quickly withdrawn.

"Sorry, Paula. It must be your great acting."

Paula had blonde hair with dark streaks underneath, a weak chin, a simian upper lip and green eyes. In an exaggerated drawl they never could have used in the film, she told him that, for his information, she had been commended for her acting. She had been in plays and gotten wonderful reviews. His mother turned an expression on Ryan and he acknowledged with a shrug that he had betrayed her again by casting an experienced actress, that he had known it at the time. It turned out that Paula was not even a southerner, she came to Ole Miss from out of state hoping to join its tradition of beauty pageant winners, but was disappointed.

Davin felt a rush of pity for his mother, her face suddenly looking older in her scholarly wirerim glasses, with gray in the dark waves at her temples. Older than her by nine years, his father was graying even more, with a future bald spot on top. When they made a stop to eat and gas up, his dad sat down in the booth next to Paula, lighthearted and cheerful like everything had turned out great. His mother would not speak to Ryan for awhile and sat looking out the restaurant window with the corners of her mouth turned down as if engraved in stone.

They went on like that until the next day in Phoenix, in another restaurant waiting for their lunch orders to arrive.

"Well, I think you made a great picture, Mom."

She looked aside at Davin in appreciation, smoking a cigarette and avoiding eye contact with Paula.

"I always try to be faithful," she looked at Ryan.

"You know that's impossible," he said.

"Is it?"

"You know it is."

"When you love a story," she inhaled from the cigarette and blew smoke upward, then she lowered her chin and looked steadily at Ryan, "you don't want to change it."

"Well anyway, Sarah. We both met our match this time. I had to accept the limitations of pictures and you had to accept the limitations of words. I can admit that a picture isn't always worth a thousand words--"

--"Sometimes it takes a thousand words to explain a picture."

"Especially propaganda," Davin said.

"God is identified with the Word, not a picture."

"People don't go to pictures to listen to words." Ryan chuckled, "Did you see me in the barn trying to photograph Vardaman experiencing the origin of ideas in sensations?"

"It's good though, isn't it?" Paula looked puzzled.

"Oh sure, honey," Ryan assured her, smiling and patting her arm. "Of course it's good. It's sensational!"

"It's true to Faulkner," Davin said.

"I'm just glad he'll never see it." His mother looked down and stubbed out her cigarette, "Since he doesn't go to movies. I had to reduce it so much. So many little changes. It's not the words themselves really. It's what the words can evoke."

"I can hardly wait to see it," Paula said.

"What are your plans after that?" his mother asked her.

Paula looked aside at Ryan.

"I told you, Sarah," he answered patiently. "I just said that I'd mention her to a few people, that's all. Suggest places to live and what to look out for--you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Sarah, don't make a deal out of it."

"Well, it *is* a deal. Isn't it?" She looked at him steadily with a controlled outrage, "This really stinks, Ryan."

"Now you're getting emotional."

"Am I?"

"You've had plenty of time, Sarah."

"So you did this to punish me."

"Mrs. Easley," said Paula with the superiority of the calm. "Ryan was kind enough to offer me a ride. Then after I hurt my knees on the barge, he offered to help me find a place to live, that's all. I assure you, Mrs. Easley, I am not that kind of girl."

His mother tossed her lighter and cigarette pack into her black purse and snapped it shut.

"Well, I'm not this kind of wife. And I've gone far enough." She put a hand on Davin's arm, "Would you get my bags for me, dear?" She stood up and looked down through her tears at Paula. "You were more convincing in your scene with the knife."

"Sarah--" Ryan half rose.

"Mom, wait!"

Davin stood up flooded with anger. He watched his mother go into the bar, then he went outside and brought in her luggage. In the bar, he sat down with her in a corner booth.

"I'll go with you."

"No, honey. You go on, I'll be fine."

"I'm not going to leave you here."

"No, really. Go ahead. I have an old friend who lives here in Phoenix. I think I'll give him a call."

"What about the picture?"

"Tell him I'm ready to do the final cut. He'll know what I mean. Tell him I'll call him."

Davin returned to the restaurant feeling that he would never see his parents together again. Paula sat eating a burger. As he sat down, his dad looked up with concern from cutting his steak.

He could barely look at his father.

"You never believed in it at all, did you."

"I did everything I could."

"You're probably going to burn it."

"But you said I was sensational," Paula looked confused.

"Davin, stop talking crazy."

He felt the towline snap.

"I'm going back to Berkeley. I don't want to work for you."

"Now wait! You haven't seen the whole picture."

"I've seen enough."

"Listen, Davin," his father raised his voice. "I lost my mother when I was only ten. I agreed to do this picture for *your* mother and for mine too. I put my heart into it. You

know, you can choose how to look at this." He gestured with his knife, "Pick a better lens. Can't you give your old man a softer focus? Don't get stuck looking through one little viewfinder. Do you follow me? I'm trying to help you, kid! Come on, Davin. Be the director of your life, not just an actor."

The desert ahead glared hot.

Eisley glanced aside at the girl with bedroom eyes sitting beside him, then into the rearview mirror at his son morose and hugging himself in the backseat. He never wanted to do this picture in the first place, but Sarah wanted the rights. So he kept his promise. He put his heart into it, hoping it would change her mind about him, did the best he could as a matter of professional integrity as always because he owed her that, as if he was making this picture as the crowning achievement of his own career, but Sarah wanted it all her way. So he let her direct, since you can only have one director or you fight about everything, because he knew it would be awful--a film about hauling a corpse to a cemetery for God sake! Oh yeah, people would flock to see that. It would offend southerners, bore northerners and probably revive accusations that he was sympathetic with Communists, who had declared their intention to bury us. Directors believed they could tell any story with pictures, and maybe a little dialogue. His colleagues would laugh at all the narration in this thing, the picture would be a stinker and the top executives at Universal would lose respect for his judgment. As I Lay Bankrupt. He promised her to *make* this picture, not to release it. He would be a fool to release it now, if ever. He really had no choice now that Sarah had made her decision about him. After she did the final cut, this picture would be leverage in their divorce settlement and he intended to make sure that it got buried in an archive.

The girl turned on the van radio.

Eisley drove at a high constant speed, the van rocking a little from side to side yet buoyant on the earth, feeling as if the tires were about to leave the asphalt and the van to rocket.

Passing swiftly by, the aloe cactus giants basking in the desert with outreaching tentacles reminded him of the ones on each side of the driveways at their ranch when they all lived together in the San Fernando Valley and he felt happier and more complete than he had been since. Davin would come around in time and Karen was just fine, married with kids already, but Sarah. He mourned his loss, fearing he needed her more than he realized, but it was her choice. Having been faithful so long, in his way, mostly, he felt adrift and lonely now without her. He needed to recover from Sarah, meet his schedules at the studio and make a hit next time. He needed a hit badly. He was going nowhere. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a Benzedrine, popped it and swallowed. He had to stay ahead of the other guys coming up and get in touch with the younger generation.

This girl had never been west before and searching the dial she picked up a hot rock station from Los Angeles playing Elvis Presley, a heavy beat that set his fingers tapping on the steering wheel and the girl to writhing around from the hips up, gyrating her elbows and squirming on the seat in heat, snapping her fingers, eyes closed and head rocking.

They passed the Zanuck estate in Palm Springs.

As they approached San Bernardino he told her to roll down her window like his and smell the orange blossoms in the orchards, he loved that smell in the balmy air, then

ahead the sky glowed pink, radiant with excitement and promise and always erotic somehow, as if the city of angels was on fire. He entered her with a rush of anticipation, avoiding the cemetery where his first wife lay buried from a botched abortion and turning onto Sunset at twilight, since this was likely to be the highpoint of her life, so that she could see the HOLLYWOOD sign lit up on the hill and the streets lined with palm trees and the lights spread out twinkling all the way to the ocean, tapping the wheel to the beat and smoking a cigar because he had already called ahead to his house manager asking her to light up the swimming pool and turn on all the illumination on the grounds--for the full effect of his columned white mansion in antebellum elegance overlooking the city--put fresh roses in the red guest room and remind him in the morning of his appointment to get his teeth whitened.

Michael Hollister
Chapters 2-3
from Hollyworld (2006)