HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(4), 723-726
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

Transgressions of Social Space in *As I Lay Dying*

Jiayi Wang*, Li Zhang

North China Electric Power University, Baoding 071000, Hebei, China.

How to cite this paper: Jiayi Wang, Li Zhang. (2025) Transgressions of Social Space in *As I Lay Dying*. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(4), 723-726. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.04.010

Received: February 28, 2025
Accepted: March 30, 2025
Published: April 30, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Jiayi Wang, North China Electric Power University, Baoding 071000, Hebei, China.

Abstract

This paper examines how William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* reconfigures social space through acts of internal transgression, using Henri Lefebvre's framework as a critical tool. While Lefebvre famously argues that social space is a dynamic product of everyday human activity, Faulkner's narrative complicates this view by revealing how transgressive behaviors and fragmented identities destabilize dominant spatial representations. The analysis focuses on the Bundren family's journey through a marginal rural landscape—a setting where physical isolation and ideological exclusions are both produced and contested. By examining the interplay between spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation, the essay demonstrates that the process of spatial production is not only continuously replicated but also inherently vulnerable to internal subversions. Faulkner's text thus becomes a site where the imposition of hegemonic spatial orders is actively challenged, suggesting that transgressive acts can expose and eventually transform repressive social environments. This perspective moves beyond Lefebvre's classical assertion by highlighting the critical potential embedded in narrative fragmentation and inner dissent, thereby offering a renewed understanding of how narratives can contest and reshape the spatial dimensions of social power.

Keywords

As I Lay Dying; Spatial Theory; Representative of Space; Power and Space

1. Introduction

Faulkner's novels, celebrated as resplendent treasures within the pantheon of American modern literature, vividly capture the historical transformations and humanistic landscapes of the American South. Among these masterpieces, *As I Lay Dying* stands out as a pinnacle of his literary prowess, renowned for its distinctive spatial articulation that has indelibly marked the literary canon. In the wake of the "spatial turn" in global literary studies, revisiting the spatial dimensions of *As I Lay Dying* not only broadens the horizons of literary criticism but also injects fresh vitality into literary theory.

Substantial scholarship has explored the interplay between space and identity within Faulkner's work; however, a critical perspective on the transgression of social space, particularly through Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, remains comparatively underexplored. Prior essays and academic discussions have yet to fully articulate how internal transgression and narrative fragmentation function as mechanisms for contesting and reshaping dominant spatial representations. This gap has inspired the development of this essay, which reimagines Faulkner's text as a dynamic site where everyday acts of defiance actively contribute to the reconstitution of social space.

2. Marginalization and Production of Social Space

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* masterfully weaves together the tangible hardships of a rural journey with the more elusive, internal landscapes of its characters. This convergence of physical and symbolic terrains can be fruitfully examined

through a framework that considers how space is actively produced and contested, not merely a static backdrop, but a dynamic participant in the narrative. One useful approach to this analysis is to consider space in three interrelated dimensions. Perceived space leads the first. The physicality of the Bundrens' journey is central to the novel. Faulkner's depiction of the rural landscape—illustrated by the description of a road that "stretched ahead like a stubborn wound" (Faulkner, 1930)—captures the relentless, palpable hardships the family endures. The rutted, dusty road and its unyielding distance are not incidental details; they are everyday, material conditions that shape the characters' lives and continually remind them of the obstacles they must overcome. Then, the conceived space. Beyond the physical, Faulkner's narrative also interrogates imposed ideologies through the constructed images of space. The rural setting is often portrayed as backward and desolate, a notion underscored by a character's wry observation, "Out here, nothing's ever done right" (Faulkner, 1930). Such representations are reflective of broader societal constructs, where the rural is seen as inferior compared to the idealized, rational urban center. This externally imposed conception reinforces existing power dynamics by privileging the modern and progressive over the marginal and rustic. Lastly, the spaces of representation, namely, the lived space. In contrast to both the tangible and the imposed, lived space emerges from personal experience, memory, and emotion. The inner landscape of the Bundrens, with its moments of quiet despair and fragmented internal monologues, offers a counterpoint to the ordered world of conceived space. Darl's anguished utterance, "I don't know what I am" (Faulkner, 1930), exemplifies the struggle to find meaning and identity amid external pressures. This lived space challenges abstract representations, presenting a more fluid, contested, and deeply personal perspective on the world.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the Bundrens are exiled into a rural landscape that is as much produced by physical hardship as by the ideological constructions imposed upon it. Their isolated homestead-set against a backdrop of "a road stretching into the distance like a dying ember" (Faulkner, 1930), is not a neutral space but one imbued with the oppressive values of modernity. Lefebvre (1991) argues that every society produces its own distinctive space, and in the case of the Bundrens, that space is marked by exclusion and marginalization. Doreen Massey (2005) similarly posits that such spatial production reinforces social hierarchies, marking those who inhabit the margins as other, as lesser.

The Bundrens' reality is further foregrounded by the journey of the town doctor. His arduous trek-where he laments, "This road never ends" (Faulkner, 1930), illustrates not only the physical expanse that separates them from the urban center but also the symbolic gap constructed by dominant representations. His struggle reflects a broader ideological framework where rural space is envisaged as backward, a peripheral zone to be policed and managed from afar (Duarte & Salama, 2020).

Furthermore, Lefebvre's notion of an "underground power"-the unspoken forces that shape spatial practices—finds clear expression in the Bundrens' daily existence (Lefebvre, 1991). The oppressive weather, the broken roads, and the vast, unyielding distances all serve as instruments of control, reinforcing the isolation and subordination of the rural. Unwin (2020) emphasizes that such spatial practices are not accidental; they are deliberate processes that maintain social hierarchies. The Bundrens, by virtue of their very location, are denied the possibilities that come with urban space, a theme that resonates with Lee and Martínez's (2019) examination of peripheral development.

3. Transgressing Boundaries: Acts of Spatial Dissidence

Despite the reified structures that confine them, the characters of *As I Lay Dying* actively transgress the boundaries imposed on their social space. Lefebvre's analysis maintains that space is not only produced but is also open to contestation. The Bundren family's fateful journey toward Jefferson, rather than constituting a mere geographic relocation, emerges as a symbolic act of resistance against the preordained spatial order.

A particularly striking example is Darl Bundren's attempted arson of the barn that temporarily houses his mother, Addie Bundren's decaying body. The barn, as a material object, is a quintessential element of conceived space: it is designed, ordered, and controlled. It represents a stable, rational structure—a product of the planning and mapping that characterizes modern spatial production (Lefebvre, 1991). Darl's impulsive, violent act of setting the barn on fire is emblematic of a deep-seated desire to disrupt this orderly configuration. By challenging the structural integrity of the barn, Darl challenges the very conceptual framework that seeks to impose a rational order upon a chaotic existence. His transgression is not random; it is a deliberate rejection of an abstract, imposed spatiality—a rejection that resonates with Lefebvre's assertion that the production of space is inherently contestable. In attempting to destroy the barn, Darl enacts a form of spatial dissidence: he seeks to break apart the uniformity of representations that render the rural landscape inert and subservient to capitalist ideologies. His actions signal a yearning for a spatial order that is determined not solely by imposed regimes but that is instead capable of accommodating contradiction and

transformation. Darl's incendiary act challenges the dominance of the conceived space, opening up the possibility for a reappropriation of lived space that is defined by resistance and creativity (Lefebvre, 1991). Merrifield (1993) also notes that such acts of transgression reveal the potential for rearticulating space based on lived experience rather than on abstract notions of order.

Similarly, the silence of Addie Bundren is itself a profound act of spatial dissidence. In a narrative where characters' dialogue shapes their interaction with the environment, Addie's persistent muteness transforms her bodily presence into a potent symbol of resistance. "Her silence speaks louder than any word" (Faulkner, 1930) becomes a refrain that underscores the ineffable quality of lived space. Lefebvre (1991) contends that the realm of lived space is as much about what is unspoken as what is articulated. Addie's muteness disrupts conventional forms of representation, challenging the assumption that meaning is produced solely through language. As Casakin (2021) argues, such non-verbal acts open up a sphere of resistance that destabilizes the imposed order of conceived space.

The transgressive acts of Darl and Addie thus serve as powerful counterpoints to the rigid spatial orders that define the Bundren family's environment. Their actions underscore a vital insight from Lefebvre: that social space is not an immutable given but a dynamic, contested arena where everyday practices can subvert and transform the dominant order. Each act of rebellion-whether through physical destruction or through the refusal to articulate-creates moments of rupture in the otherwise oppressive production of space. These ruptures expose the inherent contradictions within the imposed spatial order and open up the possibility for rearticulating space on terms defined by lived experience rather than abstract representations.

4. Reconstructing Social Space Through Transgression

The Bundrens' journey toward Jefferson is more than a series of physical movements, it is a metamorphosis in the production of social space. As the family traverses a landscape marked by broken roads, physical decay, and environmental obstacles, their movement becomes a living negotiation of the boundaries that define their identity and social placement.

Every obstacle encountered, dilapidated roadways, the incessant weather, and the miscommunications among family members serve as a catalyst that disrupts the conventional spatial order. Lefebvre posits that the production of lived space is continuously shaped by the interplay between physical conditions and the symbolic representations imposed on them (Lefebvre, 1991). In *As I Lay Dying*, as the Bundrens struggle with both tangible hardships and internal conflicts, their progress through the landscape reveals the fissures in an ordered, conceived space. Their journey is a process of spatial praxis—a series of practices that not only expose the inadequacies of the existing order but also suggest the possibility of forging new social relations.

Faulkner's narrative structure, with its fragmented voices and non-linear temporalities, mirrors this reconfigurative process. Just as lived space is not a static container but a dynamic, ongoing creation, the novel's form resists a single, fixed meaning. The disjointed narrative—its shifts in perspective, pauses, and overlapping monologues—reflects the inherent fragmentation and multiplicity of lived space. This narrative fragmentation becomes a metaphor for the fluidity and contestability of social space, suggesting that spatial production is always in the process of being remade through human action and resistance.

As the Bundrens negotiate their journey, each act of transgression-each moment that disrupts the routine, each encounter with the hostile landscape-acts as a potential site for spatial reconfiguration. Darl's incendiary act and Addie's silent defiance do not merely represent isolated moments of rebellion; they contribute to an overall re-articulation of the Bundrens' social space. By subverting the abstract representations that have long defined the rural environment, the Bundrens affirm the possibility of a space that is not fully predetermined by external forces but is open to reinterpretation through the lived practices of its inhabitants.

In this light, the narrative of *As I Lay Dying* is not merely an account of geographic movement but also a symbolic journey toward liberating space. The oppressive order—a product of both natural conditions and socially imposed representations—is persistently contested by the alternative, lived experiences of the Bundren family. Their journey challenges the modernist view of space as a fixed, neutral container, demonstrating instead that space is an arena where identities are negotiated and reimagined. The act of traversing a hostile landscape, with all its uncertainties and ruptures, becomes a powerful metaphor for the transformative potential inherent in the everyday production of social space.

5. Conclusion

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* interrogates the production, contestation, and transformation of social space by engaging with the interplay between physical practices, abstract representations, and lived experiences. Interpreted exclusively through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory, the novel reveals that the Bundren family's existence is deeply enmeshed in the production of social space—a space continuously produced through everyday routines, institutional representations, and embodied acts of resistance. Their isolation in a hostile, marginal rural landscape underscores how spatial practices are regulated by established representations, while their transgressive acts—Darl's incendiary outburst and Addie's profound silence—expose the potential for rearticulating that space from the perspective of lived experience.

The Bundrens' journey toward Jefferson is not merely a physical migration; it is a transformative process—a spatial metamorphosis in which every obstacle and every act of defiance contributes to the reconfiguration of social space. Faulkner's fragmented narrative, with its multi-voiced discourse and non-linear progression, mirrors the fluid and contested nature of lived space, thereby reinforcing Lefebvre's assertion that social space is not static but is continuously produced, negotiated, and reappropriated through everyday practices (Unwin, 2020).

Ultimately, *As I Lay Dying* exemplifies Lefebvre's central tenet that social space is not an inert container but a dynamic product of human activity. The Bundrens' isolated existence, their moments of existential anguish-"I don't know what I am" (Faulkner, 1930)—and their courageous acts of spatial resistance underscore that the liberation of social space begins with the disruption of its dominant representations. Faulkner's text, with its seamless interweaving of narrative, dialogue, and sensory description, challenges us to envision a world in which space is continually remade by the lived experiences of its inhabitants-a world where every act of transgression, every whispered silence, and every burst of defiant rhetoric carries the potential for profound social transformation.

In this reimagined space, the oppressive boundaries constructed by imposed ideologies give way to a fluid, contested arena where the very act of living becomes an act of resistance. The Bundrens' journey is a testament to the ever-evolving nature of social space-one that is not bound by fixed representations but is opened up by the broken roads, the scattered voices, and the indomitable spirit of those who dare to transgress. In this light, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is not only a literary tour de force but also a compelling intervention in the ongoing struggle over how space is defined, produced, and, ultimately, liberated.

References

Casakin, A. (2021). Lefebvre's Spatial Triad in the Digital Era: Reinterpreting space production and everyday life. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *39*(1), 33-51.

Duarte, F., & Salama, A. (2020). Production of space in urban regeneration: Lefebvre in a post-pandemic world. *Cities*, *105*, 102767.

Faulkner, W. (1930). As I lay dying. New York, NY: Random House.

Lee, J., & Martínez, R. (2019). Rethinking rural space production: A Lefebvrian analysis of peripheral development. *Geoforum*, *100*, 175-183.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). The production of space. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Massey, D. (2005). For space. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Merrifield, A. (1993). Place and space: A Lefebvrian reconciliation. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *18*(1), 17-24.

Unwin, T. (2020). A waste of space? Revisiting the social production of space in a new era. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *25*(3), 15-22.