

Disability and the Avant-garde: Challenging Norms through Experimental Literature in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930)

The emergence of avant-garde literature in the early twentieth century, marked by its radical experimentation and rejection of traditional narrative conventions, provides a critical framework for rethinking representations of disability beyond reductive stereotypes and sentimental tropes. Characterized by fragmentation, non-linearity, and shifting perspectives, avant-garde writing destabilizes normative assumptions about coherence, rationality, and subjectivity—assumptions that are deeply intertwined with ableist models of the human mind and body. Within this literary context, disability is not merely depicted as a theme or condition but becomes embedded in the very structure of narrative form. The use of unconventional techniques to represent disabled consciousness reflects the complexity, multiplicity, and often incommunicable nature of lived experience, while simultaneously critiquing social and cultural systems that marginalize those who deviate from ideals of cognitive and behavioral normalcy. Experimental literature thus offers a space in which disability can be encountered as an epistemological challenge, compelling readers to confront the limitations of language, perception, and narrative authority.

This paper explores the representation of disability in avant-garde literature through a focused analysis of intellectual disability in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). While Faulkner's innovative narrative techniques—such as stream of consciousness, temporal disjunction, and multiple narrators—have been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to how these techniques shape the reader's engagement with disability itself. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the section narrated by Benjy Compson, a character with an intellectual disability, radically disrupts conventional narrative logic through its sensory-driven, non-chronological structure. Benjy's perspective challenges normative expectations of cognition and communication, forcing readers to abandon linear interpretation and instead engage with a form of consciousness structured by affect, memory, and bodily sensation. Similarly, in *As I Lay Dying*, the character of Darl Bundren—often read as intellectually or psychologically disabled—occupies a liminal narrative position that both grants him heightened perceptual insight and marks him as socially deviant. His eventual silencing and institutionalization underscore the cultural intolerance of non-normative forms of consciousness, even when they possess interpretive power.

By foregrounding disabled perspectives through experimental narrative forms, Faulkner's novels demonstrate how avant-garde techniques can simultaneously represent disability and challenge dominant cultural narratives about ability, intelligence, and rational selfhood. These texts resist simplistic or purely medicalized understandings of disability, instead presenting it as a complex interaction between individual consciousness and social judgment. The difficulty readers experience in navigating fragmented narratives mirrors the broader cultural discomfort with cognitive difference, thereby implicating the reader in the very processes of exclusion and normalization the texts critique. Situating Faulkner's work within the broader landscape of twentieth-century experimental literature, this study argues that avant-garde narrative strategies play a crucial role in expanding disability discourse. By disrupting traditional forms and destabilizing normative standards of meaning and coherence, Faulkner's fiction urges readers to reconsider entrenched notions of normalcy, identity, and value, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and nuanced understandings of disability within literary and cultural studies.