

“My Mother Is a Fish”:

All-Encompassing Inadequacy in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*



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Novels tend to get their effects from plenitude, from excess and richness. What, then, to make of Faulkner’s famous one-sentence chapter? Suspended in the middle of his *As I Lay Dying* is Vardaman’s famous and opaque statement: “My mother is a fish.” Taylor Lemaire takes this weirdness head on, working with the chapter’s impoverishment as a key to its function, paying attention even to its appearance on the page, arguing that “the line floats singularly within the vast, white void that surrounds it.” The line’s richness lies in how it relates to another famous phrase from the novel, Addie Bundren’s assertion that words are merely a “shape to fill a lack” – Addie’s comment itself being another assertion/demonstration of impoverishment and displacement.

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In William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying*, the Bundren family’s communication is minimal. Over the deadening snore of a wood saw, the Bundrens mourn their matriarch the only way they know how. Their livelihood depends upon the animals they rear; as such, they are utterly familiar with the behaviours of these creatures – often even more than they are familiar with their own human idiosyncrasies. This familiarity affects their linguistic tendencies by influencing the way they interact and communicate. Addie Bundren, the aforementioned matriarch, distrusts language: she believes

that words never adequately represent what they mean. She treats her children as similarly inadequate: as forms to fill the hole that her sin creates, a way to make up for her faults. Despite the ill treatment of Addie’s children, they inherit some of her attributes. Vardaman is Addie’s last child – her final replacement – and he employs the same method of replacement and reasoning in the wake of his mother’s death. Vardaman’s assertion that his “mother is a fish” acts as a “shape to fill [the] lack” Addie’s absence creates (84, 172); this illustrates the inadequacy of language that plagues the family.

Communication in *As I Lay Dying* is strained – and often entirely absent. The inadequacy of language and the characters’ failure to communicate is often expressed in Faulkner’s textual decisions throughout the novel. MacGowan, an inhabitant of Jefferson, states that country people like the Bundrens “dont know what they want, and the balance of the time they cant tell it to you” (243). An example of this inability to communicate makes itself apparent in section 20, narrated by Tull. He attempts to describe the shape of the coffin Cash builds, and the way Addie is placed inside of it. In lieu of representing it linguistically, Tull draws a diagram of the coffin:  (88). He then goes on to explain that they place Addie backwards within it. As scholar Michael Kaufmann points out, “Tull cannot say . He can only write it” (109). Tull’s inability to communicate linguistically the structure of the coffin behaves as a literal “shape to fill a lack” (Faulkner 172) – the shape being the diagram of the coffin and the lack being its actual characteristics. Tull’s diagram

outlines the geometric shape of the coffin, but does not articulate its contents, thus leaving much of the lack unexpressed. Vardaman's fish assertion also represents his inability to fill a lack through communication alone. The assertion, "my mother is a fish" (84), is an entire chapter that appears on the page as a single line of text; it is meant to be the shape that fills the lack created by Addie's absence but, as a textual example of this method of reasoning, it appears inadequate. The text fills very little of the page it occupies; if we consider the line of text to be the shape corresponding with Vardaman's mental process, and the blank space of the page to be the lack corresponding with his mother's absence, this is quite significant. The line floats singularly within the vast, white void that surrounds it, and it is clear that Vardaman's attempt to reason through his mother's absence does not completely express the death that has occurred - failing to fill the enormity of the lack. Faulkner uses textual effects to visually express the inadequacy of his characters' attempts to communicate, emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of this inadequacy.

Vardaman's fish assertion, in addition to illustrating the inadequacy of language in textual form, also functions as an example of the tendency of characters in *As I Lay Dying* to analogize the behaviour of humans to the behaviour of animals. This is another symptom of their strained communicative abilities, and another method of filling a lack. In his article "The Modern Magnetic Animal: *As I Lay Dying* and the Uncanny Zoology of Modernism" Christopher White states that Faulkner employs this

method of description in order to "convey affects and states 'too profound [...] for even thought'" (83). White claims that Vardaman's fish assertion is one such moment, and that it is a natural way for the child to make sense of the trauma. Vardaman proves himself comfortable with animals even before he makes his aforementioned assertion. After dropping and prodding the fish in the dirt he becomes familiar with it and can remember the way it felt in his grasp, its "not-blood on [his] hands and overalls" (Faulkner 53). He is also aware of the part this creature plays in his family's livelihood, stating that "it will be cooked and et and she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell" (67). Vardaman's awareness of the role the fish plays in nourishing his family and his understanding that the fish will become a part of each person who ingests it, makes clear his decision to use this fish to fill the lack that Addie's absence creates. Though he does not have the language to explain his reasoning for using the fish as a replacement for Addie, and the similar sustenance of life she gives him, he uses the fish as a shape to "convey affects and states 'too profound [...] for [his] thought'" (White 83). This state lies mostly dormant in him, due to his lack of linguistic skills - but he is able to partially express it through this tendency to assign animal characteristics to humans.

Despite the implicit reasoning that fuels this "shape to fill a lack" as a result of Vardaman's familiarity with his non-human counterparts (172), it is still inadequate in truly filling the hollow created by Addie's absence. Vardaman continues to reassure himself of his assertion, repeating it

several times, attempting to convince himself that his reasoning holds up. Anxiously, he repeats it: “[b]ut my mother is a fish. Vernon seen it. He was there” (101); again shortly after, “Pa shaves every day now because my mother is a fish” (102); and later still, “Cash is sick. He’s sick on the box. But my mother is a fish” (195). These repetitions are Vardaman’s attempts to multiply the shape he has created, in order to better fill the lack his mother left – since he has realized that his assertion does not immediately do its job in replacing her. Here, Faulkner suggests that the all-encompassing nature of inadequacy undermines even what characters originally believe to be reasonable. While Vardaman and other characters in the novel use several shapes to fill a variety of absences, Vardaman’s assertion – and the fact that he is the one to make it – is particularly significant; this is due to the purpose Addie assigns him in her own distorted method of reasoning.

The maternal instinct within Addie has never sufficed to the small lives she was meant to sustain. Operating under the assumption that “the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead” (169), she puts very little faith in the systems the living use to make existence more understandable. Language is one of these systems that Addie distrusts. Believing words insufficient to fit what they mean to express, Addie treats motherhood in a way that falls far from the definitions traditionally assigned to it. Scholar Marc Hewson explains that, “[f]or Addie, motherhood seems to be the only possible relationship that is not necessarily mediated by linguistic communication” (555).

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Vardaman's fish assertion portrays the inadequacy of language in both form and content: as Hewson extrapolates, the “experience of mother loss for him, much like the experience of motherhood for Addie, cannot adequately be expressed in words” (559). This idea of the nonverbal bond between Addie and her children appears innocent at first, but as the children grow, the lack of communication they receive from their mother becomes increasingly damaging to their development, and Addie begins to resent their attempts to shatter this nonverbal bond.

Fueled by guilt and obligation after her affair with Whitfield, Addie uses her children to negate her sins - to replace the existence of the illegitimate child, Jewel, with more of Anse's children. Once this replacement is complete, she believes she will be able to “get ready to die” (176). These children, the shapes she uses to occupy the void created by her sin, are treated as prerequisites for death, with Vardaman being her last measure and the shape that is meant to finally fill the lack. Thus, the way that Vardaman creates shapes to fill absences is particularly significant. While it is evident that Vardaman shares some of his mother's attributes - in that he employs the same method of reasoning that she does - his intentions are to preserve his mother; he has a desperate need to keep her presence with him. The intentions that drive Addie to use her children to fill a void are entirely opposite, stemming from the desire to die. The irony that Vardaman, the last rung in Addie's morbid plan, should be the one who so adamantly attempts to keep her alive is

telling of Faulkner's idea of the all-encompassing inadequacy of language: that it is transferred by blood and even ideas of death can be foiled by it, in a way.

Through content, textual form, and the "bitter blood" that flows within the Bundrens (176), the inadequacy of language makes itself known in *As I Lay Dying*. Vardaman's fish assertion is the ironic culmination of this inadequacy. Through his use of an inadequate mode of reasoning, the attempt to fill hollows with various, ill fitting shapes - a method he inherits from his mother - he unconsciously foils Addie's treatment of him as a prerequisite for death. Vardaman preserves his mother, keeping her alive for himself, through the same method of reasoning she uses to make her process of "get[ting] ready to die" possible (176) - by using various "shapes to fill a lack" (172). Faulkner presents the inadequacy of language as all-encompassing, capable of presenting itself in several shapes and forms, whilst never truly being able to fill the multitudinous lacks that riddle the novel.

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Works Cited

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