Fish as a Common Denominator?

Symbolism in As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í ensku

Gréta Hauksdóttir
Kt.: 150676-3209

Leiðbeinandi: Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir
Maí 2017
Abstract

Vardaman Bundren, the youngest character in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, has puzzled readers and critics alike with his famous statement, “My mother is a fish.” Despite the main focus of the story being on the family’s ill-fated journey to bury the matriarch Addie Bundren in accord with her own wishes, Vardaman’s conclusion is something that stands out in the context. In order to understand the author’s motives and the character of Vardaman, this essay looks into the background of Faulkner and the symbolism in *As I Lay Dying*, addressing five symbols specifically, also considering the appearance and description of Vardaman in the story.

To explain Vardaman’s statement, I begin by looking into the theory of psychological transference which may be the simplest and possibly most apparent explanation, being previously known and documented among psychoanalysts. Following that theory comes the idea that, as Vardaman wonders what happens to his mother after she passes from this life, he may be thinking that she will reincarnate as a fish. Lastly, a third hypothesis is the more profound speculation that Vardaman is subconsciously making a connection between the fish, which is a Christ motif, and Virgin Mary; an idea that may be the one most fitting with the religious culture of the South.

*As I Lay Dying* offers many opportunities for interpretation, both in its story and through its characters. When taking the three hypotheses addressed here into account, I believe it is, in the end, up to the reader himself to favour one over another, or possibly allow all of them to come into play.
Content

1. “Use Any Facts Real or Imaginary” ................................................................. 6
2. Symbols in As I Lay Dying ................................................................................. 11
   2.1. Death ........................................................................................................... 11
   2.2. Horse .......................................................................................................... 12
   2.3. Water, and Crossing a River ................................................................... 13
   2.4. Fisher King .................................................................................................. 14
   2.5. Fish ............................................................................................................ 15
3. Vardaman Bundren: One of Faulkner’s Famous Idiots, or a Voice of a Deeper
   Meaning? ........................................................................................................ 16
   3.1. Vardaman’s Alleged or Fabled Age ....................................................... 16
   3.2. Portrayed as a Confused Child ................................................................. 17
4. “My Mother is a Fish.” .................................................................................. 20
   4.1. Coping With Loss Through Displacement ......................................... 20
   4.2. Reincarnation Through Metamorphosis ............................................. 23
   4.3. The Christ Metaphor and the Mother Goddess ................................... 25
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 30
Works Cited .................................................................................................... 32
Fish as a Common Denominator?

As I Lay Dying was written by William Faulkner in 1929 and published the following year. It quickly became and has continued to be popular, and is credited with having directly influenced other acclaimed books (McCrum). As with many famous or much discussed artists and writers, readers and critics alike find symbols and references in their work, even where the author did not intend to write any. Reading more into the story than the author intended is one sign of an appreciation for a work and, in this spirit, I will take the liberty to discuss a few ideas regarding the intriguing Vardaman Bundren. He is the youngest character in the book and is portrayed as a rather strange or foolish boy through his speech and actions. Relatively early in the story, he comes to the conclusion that his deceased mother is a fish. This peculiar claim gets a chapter of its own in As I Lay Dying, and similarly, a whole section of this essay is devoted to an attempt to decipher it, as it has full potential to be interpreted in an ambiguous or enigmatic way. Vardaman’s mother, Addie Bundren, had a rather unorthodox view on words herself, feeling they were merely shapes “to fill a lack” and “invented by someone who had to have a word for [something they did not fully understand]” (Faulkner 171-72), and one cannot help but wonder if Vardaman shares her opinion. When Vardaman claims his mother is a fish, he seems at first to be either using her concept of fish as “just a shape to fill a lack” or being merely a simpleton, who cannot distinguish one from the other. However, although seeming both humorous and naïve, there may be more to his thoughts than what seems obvious at first sight, and this statement can be understood in various ways.

In attempt to keep his mother alive or dealing with her passing away, Vardaman may be subconsciously transferring his feelings or understanding of recent events onto a fish he previously caught, and which was turned into a supper dish shortly after his mother’s passing. In Christian religion the fish motif is connected to the idea of reincarnation, and with the American South being primarily Roman Catholic, Vardaman may have an inkling of this concept. As reincarnation comes through Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, the fish motif is associated with both Jesus and Mary. In this essay, I examine how these three possibilities may explain
Vardaman’s claim that his mother is a fish. In order to understand Faulkner and his fictional character Vardaman Bundren, I looked into the background of Faulkner and the symbolism in *As I Lay Dying*, addressing five symbols specifically, also considering the appearance and description of Vardaman in the story. To explain Vardaman’s statement, I begin by looking into the theory of psychological transference which, to me, seems the simplest and possibly most apparent explanation. Following that theory comes the idea that Vardaman may be thinking, wishfully or not, that his mother will reincarnate as a fish, and lastly, the more profound speculation that he is subconsciously connecting her with Virgin Mary.

*As I Lay Dying* is written as a stream of different characters’ consciousness and based solely on their inner dialogues, accounting of events and conversations with others. The story contains fifty-nine chapters divided between fifteen narrators providing their different points of view on events and proceedings, by reporting both on their own thoughts and actions as well as what they witness and hear around them, and a lot can be read into what they say, do not say, and what they decide to account for in their narrations. There is no one omniscient narrator, although Darl sometimes describes scenarios where he is not present.
1. “Use Any Facts Real or Imaginary”

William Faulkner was born on 25 September 1897 in Mississippi, growing up in Oxford in Lafayette County. Inspired by his native surroundings, Faulkner created an area of his own, Yoknapatawpha County, in which many of his stories and novels are placed. Although fictional, Yoknapatawpha County and its county seat of Jefferson do draw similarities from Lafayette County and Oxford. Regarding the choice and presentation of the area, which his compatriots felt might give a wrong or distorted view, Faulkner said he used exaggeration when he needed to, “and cruelty as a last resort. The area itself is incidental. It’s just all I know” (Faulkner, “Classroom Statements at the University of Mississippi” 54). This description may also be applicable to his literary characters, whose attributes he collected among people and stories of people around his area. The Civil War, which changed the cultural landscape of the United States and the South especially, had ended a little over a decade prior to his birth, and left Southerners with remains of former glory. The Reconstruction Era (1863-1877) was considered harsh times by many white Southerners, and the rather forceful transfer into the new and industrial ways of the Union must have had considerable impact on the defeated South and its culture, which may be reflected in people’s characteristics and in Faulkner’s personalities. Faulkner claimed that what he knew of history, he had simply picked up from talking to people (Millgate 6), which may suggest he experienced more local views and ambiance than he would from more objective history books.

Faulkner was somewhat a mystery man when it came to answering questions regarding his life and his works. He was a notorious recreator of his own story and life, and throughout most of his adulthood stuck to the story of being son to “a negro slave and an alligator – both named Gladys Rock,” and the brother of an aeroplane (Smith 7). One cannot be entirely certain of his integrity towards “the truth,” even

---

1 A telegram sent by Philip Stone to the publisher in September 1924 reads: “[Faulkner] TELLS ME TO AUTHORIZE YOU TO USE ANY FACTS REAL OR IMAGINARY THAT YOU DESIRE TO USE IN THE BOOK OR ADVERTISING MATTER” (Meriwether and Millgate x).
when it centres on his own work. Faulkner’s responses to questions regarding his writings or his background are more towards the line of creating or sustaining a myth for the amusement of the reader, rather than to give answers to what he may have regarded as mere trivia.

Throughout his life, Faulkner was an avid collector of personal traits, and Robert Coughlan reports that he spent a good amount of time around the Memphis courthouse square “listening to the old-timers there […] swap their stories of local characters and Indians and carpetbaggers and Negroes and famous hunts and how things were in the old days” (Coughlan 54). Faulkner does not appear to have participated much in the conversation, but he was a good listener, which suited the old-timers, and he was actively collecting material and character descriptions that would later find their way into his stories. As such, many of his stories are about the lives of ordinary or common people, with a lot of subtext, a lot unsaid, and a lot to read into. Despite possible similarities to actual people he may have met or heard of, his colourful characters are likely generated from multiple sources, as is common among writers. Faulkner explains in an interview:

The actions, the separate actions, I may have seen, remembered. It was the imagination probably that tied the whole thing together into a story. It’s difficult to say just what part of any story comes specifically from imagination, what part from experience, what part from observation. It’s like having … three tanks with a collector valve. And you don’t know just how much comes from which tank. All you know is a stream of water runs from the valve when you open it, drawn from the three tanks – observation, experience, imagination. (Fant and Ashley 87-88)

Despite his complicated relationship with facts, Faulkner was rather consistent regarding the genesis of *As I Lay Dying*. He claimed to have written the novel in six weeks between working spells on the night shift rolling coals in a power plant, in order to meet costs following his marriage earlier that summer. Evidence supports his claim to a certain extent, although the dates on his manuscript indicate that the completion of the holograph version took eight weeks (Polk 264). His other claim regarding the work, that he never changed a word from the first manuscript, is disproven when
Faulkner’s revisions of the print proofs are examined (Polk 264), but make a good story nevertheless. Faulkner himself said of As I Lay Dying that it was his best novel and the “most enjoyable” to write (Smith 8; Faulkner, “Classroom Statements at the University of Mississippi” 53). It was Faulkner’s fifth novel and is repeatedly cited as an inspirational work (McCrum).

The axis of As I lay dying is the matriarch Addie Bundren, who is first dying, then dead and finally buried, all in less than a month. The story opens with an impassive dialogue where Darl describes his brother Jewel as the two of them are walking home to where their mother has been lying on her deathbed for over a week. As the brothers approach the house, they see their older brother, Cash, working on Addie’s coffin outside her window, and by Addie’s side is their sister Dewey Dell, fanning the air violently. Arriving at the house, Darl and Jewel set almost immediately upon leaving again for a small job at a nearby farm to earn three dollars, despite their father, Anse Bundren, being reluctant to let them go as he is eager to leave for Jefferson to bury Addie as soon as she has passed away. While father and son pose their arguments, Vardaman, the youngest sibling, arrives with a big fish he just caught and plans to show to his mother. Looking proud, he throws the fish on the ground and spits over his shoulder like a man. Instead of allowing the boy to take his big catch to Addie, Anse makes him clean and cut it up first, turning it into a non-fish.

Living by the words of her father, “that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time” (169), it takes Addie only ten days to die once she has set her mind to it, and Doctor Peabody arrives just in time to see Addie draw her last breath. As the family is taking in her death, Vardaman starts to associate his mother’s passing with the doctor’s arrival and his fish being cut up, and lets out his anger by hitting and driving away the doctor’s team of mules. A storm and heavy rain set in later that day, delaying Darl and Jewel’s return and eventually washing away the bridges the Bundrens need to cross in order to get to Jefferson, which is under the best of circumstances “a day’s hard ride away” (30). Due to these incidents, it takes the Bundrens nine days to get there, and in the meanwhile Addie’s body begins to putrefy in the summer heat.
With his mind set on getting false teeth in Jefferson, where he has not been in twelve years, Anse drives the funeral procession sixteen extra miles (from their farm to Samson’s bridge and back to Tull’s farm) and across a wild river, losing the family wagon and team of mules, some of Cash’s carpentry tools, and subsequently Jewel’s prized horse and Cash’s money and leg. While the Bundrens overnight at Gillespie’s farm, only a few miles from Jefferson, Darl is overcome by madness and desperation over his mother’s humiliating state and the tribulations that befall the family due to their stubbornness and irrational pursuit. As night falls, he sets Gillespie’s barn on fire in an attempt to burn the foul-smelling body and set the Bundrens, Addie herself included, free from ongoing humiliation. Jewel, however, runs into the burning barn and manages to save the coffin, thus fulfilling Addie’s prediction: “He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me” (168). Someone apparently lets Gillespie in on who is responsible for the arson, and the family is faced with either getting sued for damage or sending Darl to the Jackson mental asylum. The latter option is preferred, if only for the financial aspect, and as soon as Addie Bundren is in the ground, Darl is overcome by Dewey Dell and Jewel who then hand him over to the Jackson officials, to his own great feeling of betrayal. Anse then goes to return the two spades he borrowed for digging Addie’s grave, and returns with a wedding licence and a new Mrs. Bundren (Faulkner, “Session Fourteen, May 6, 1957” 111).

Addie Bundren had long before her actual death been set on dying once she had prepared for it sufficiently, and when her aloneness had been violated for the second time with the birth of the second of five Bundren children, she made Anse promise to bury her in Jefferson instead of the local cemetery at New Hope. This promise was her revenge on him for tricking her into having children, made sweeter by keeping Anse unaware that she was taking revenge (173-74). However, as Joseph R. Urgo points out, with his canny motive of getting himself new teeth in Jefferson as they make a trip to bury Addie, Anse manages to turn her vengeance to benefit his own purposes (15).

The Bundren family is portrayed as a highly dysfunctional family unit, with the patriarch Anse Bundren in the leading role. The process of mourning is by most
psychologists considered very important, but the Bundrens, Anse least of all, do not seem to understand this, but focus instead on the opportunities a trip to Jefferson will bring. The Bundren children seem to neither allow themselves nor be allowed by their father to give in to mourning the loss of their mother. Each individual’s dealings with the difficulties the family faces during the rather short time span of the story attests to Faulkner’s deep character development.
2. Symbols in As I Lay Dying

Faulkner is reported to have had a great thirst for knowledge, and his “friend and mentor” Philip Stone is said to have introduced Faulkner to a number of books related to mythology, religion, and psychology, including the psychanalytic ideas of Sigmund Freud (Bockting 14). For one who cares to see them, As I Lay Dying is full of symbols, but as with symbols in general, it is not always easy to understand what they stand for or may stand for. According to A. N. Whitehead, “it is often extremely difficult to analyse what lies beyond them,” even though the symbols may be specific enough (235). He adds further: “Also in its flux a symbol will have different meanings for different people. […] [For] various groups an old symbolism will have different shades of vague meaning” (235).

Aside from Addie’s death and Vardaman’s statement regarding her transformation into a fish, Faulkner links the motifs of the Fisher King and of the horse as symbolic of a mother specifically to the Bundrens, in their behaviour and in people’s accounts of them. Furthermore, the journey to take Addie’s body to Jefferson for burial involves his foregrounding of the motifs of a journey and of crossing a river. While this essay focuses primarily on the fish as a symbol, it sheds some light on the story to consider it within the broader context of symbols in the novel.

2.1. Death

In this story, death is a force that brings things into motion. “Symbolically, death represents the end of an epoch, particularly when it takes the form of sacrifice or the desire for self-destruction in the face of unendurable tension” (Cirlot 77). Tamara Slankard has a different approach to the subject of Addie Bundren, giving her the status of a metaphor of the declining South after the Civil War. Still, she puts forth an interesting idea about Addie’s corpse:

[I]t is also Addie’s corpse that immediately marks the Bundrens as the extreme outcasts among their already outcast rural Southern neighbors. The presence of Addie’s dying body in the familial home is indicative of the
South’s remove from the rest of the nation. […] And throughout the novel the Bundrens form the antiquated funeral bier upon which Addie’s corpse stands as a monument to the past that, ironically, ultimately forces the family into modernity. In this way the fetishization of the maternal corpse represents for the Bundrens a fixation on the past and also becomes a vehicle through which they might move beyond that same past. (Slankard 13)

While I do not agree entirely with Slankard’s theory of Addie’s corpse being a fixation on the past for the Bundrens, I cannot dismiss it altogether. In a different context, I can easily imagine it standing for the decaying South, but as for the context of As I Lay Dying, I do believe it stays in the setting laid out in the book. It seems to me that for the Bundrens, the body of Addie Bundren is in a way like a relic and their journey a pilgrimage to the place where she wished to be buried.

2.2. Horse

Jewel’s horse stands out as his personal and most prized possession, his own jewel. In comparison to the mules that were needed for pulling wagons, the horse stands out, both for not being an animal of work and for being more of a luxury item than a necessity. Faulkner admits to having dug around for a symbol to indicate Jewel’s position in the family, and the horse was a good fit: “That was an indication, a simple quick way to show that he did not belong to that family. That he was the alien there” (Faulkner, “Session Fourteen, May 6, 1957” 109). Jewel’s relationship with his mother also stands out in comparison with his siblings. He seems to see himself as exclusive rather than as a part of a team, and wishes that their situation would have been different: “If it had just been me when Cash fell off of that church and if it had just been me when pa laid sick with that load of wood fell on him, […] it would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at [people’s, the neighbours’] faces” (15). Carl Jung (1875-1961), who seems to have been as fixated on the Mother as his colleague Sigmund Freud was on the Penis, proposes the idea that the horse might be a symbol for the mother: “We already have seen that the symbolization of “the libido in resistance”
through the “terrible mother” in some places runs parallel with the horse. […] The mother idea is a libido symbol, and the horse is also a libido symbol, and at some points the two symbols intersect in their significances” (Jung 308).

The relationship between Jewel and his horse bears some resemblance to the relationship between Addie and Jewel. Just as Jewel does not have full control of his “jewel,” resulting in the occasional violent outburst in midst of his love for the horse, so does Addie not have full control over Jewel, whom Darl claims she always whipped and petted more (18), and who eludes his chores at home while he “moonlights” to finance his purchase of the horse. Darl seems to observe the connection: “I cannot love my mother because I have no mother. Jewel’s mother is a horse” (95). Jung would probably agree: “That the mother is the horse of the child is to be seen most plainly in the primitive custom of carrying the child on the back or letting it ride on the hip” (Jung 283). This corresponds to Darl’s emphasis on Jewel on his horse: “On the horse he rode up to Armstid’s and came back on the horse, leading Armstid’s team” (180, original emphasis).

2.3. Water, and Crossing a River

In both the Old and the New Testaments there are many events or miracles involving water which serve to reveal God’s invisible and mysterious presence at work in the world (Baldock 119-121). The crossing of Jordan, where the Israelites cross to the land of promise, is one. Despite having God part the waves so they could walk across on dry land, it became a symbol in spirituals of African slaves of crossing over to a better place. At first it represented death –crossing to another world to be liberated from slave life– but later becoming a code phrase for crossing any body of water needed to be crossed in order to throw pursuing bloodhounds off their trail on the way to freedom. Anse Bundren may be viewing his difficult journey as some sort of a pilgrimage, a journey which by “conscious decision and action, man can direct towards an existing but invisible goal” (Baldock 107). Albeit his unwillingness to move, he may view his journey as a once-in-a-lifetime trial that he has to overcome to gain a chance for a new life.
2.4. Fisher King

The story of the Fisher King, or the Wounded King, originates in Arthurian legends and was well known in the American South in the 19th century, symbolizing that when the king is sick, the land suffers. In *As I Lay Dying* the Fisher King refers to Anse Bundren, the luckless and incapable paterfamilias. Like the wounded Fisher King who is unable to move on his own, Anse is incapable or unwilling to advance or adapt, always dependent on his neighbours helping him with farm work and other type of work:

“About that corn,’ I say. I tell him again I will help him out if he gets in a tight, with her sick and all. Like most folks around here, I done holp him so much already I cant quit now” (33). However, Anse’s pride prevents him from accepting help that is directly and bluntly offered:

*She laid there three days in that box, waiting for Darl and Jewel to come clean back home and get a new wheel and go back to where the wagon was in the ditch. Take my team, Anse, I said.*

*We’ll wait for ourn, he said. She’ll want it so. She was ever a particular woman.*

*On the third day they got back and they loaded her into the wagon and started and it already too late. You’ll have to go all the way round by Samson’s bridge. It’ll take you a day to get there. Then you’ll be forty miles from Jefferson. Take my team, Anse.*

*We’ll wait for ourn. She’ll want it so.* (92, original emphasis)

Only in circumstances he recognizes as beyond his control, like Addie’s death and funeral, does Anse find the drive to improve his lot and to go to Jefferson for new teeth, having been without them for fifteen years. Just as the Fisher King is wounded in his groin area (testicles, *sub rosa*), so is Anse Bundren’s manhood, or the qualities that are expected in a man, wounded.
2.5. Fish

The idea of fish deities and the fish as a sacred being dates back centuries before Christianity. In Babylonian mythology, the fish-man Oannes, who had the upper half of a man and a fish tail below the waist, brought civilization to society, and ancient Mesopotamia had Kulullû, a fish-man with looks similar to those of Oannes. Neptune’s wagon was drawn by the Hippocampi that had the front part of a horse and a fish tail in the back, and the Zodiac symbol Capricorn is half goat, half fish. The most widespread fish icon in the Western world today is probably the so-called “Jesus fish,” and in Christian ideology the fish represents rebirth through Jesus Christ.

The first symbol, the death of Addie Bundren, can be viewed as a backdrop, against which all consecutive events fall. The title of the book refers to her looming death, and possibly the whole plot of the story, and the Bundrens act as if she were still among them by constantly referring to her wishes as the reason for their decision to take her to Jefferson, and in their own wagon instead of borrowing one to hasten their journey. In that sense, it can be argued that Addie Bundren lies dying up until the point where Anse manages to replace her with a new Mrs. Bundren.

The symbols of water, crossing a river, and of a journey are interrelated, both here and within the cultural context, connecting to the symbolism of death. The journey to Jefferson is, as well as Addie’s death, an event that sets things into motion and at the end of the journey, the outlook on things is considerably different for the Bundren family. Faulkner’s use of symbolism related to the horse and the Fisher King are only treated here as their connection to one Bundren family member each. While this essay focuses on Vardaman Bundren and the fish motif, it could be equally interesting to examine each symbol and its corresponding character or event separately.
3. **Vardaman Bundren: One of Faulkner’s Famous Idiots, or a Voice of a Deeper Meaning?**

Vardaman is the eighth person to appear as a narrating consciousness in the story and supplies a total of ten inner monologues, or one of every six. While his side of the story is seldom described in detail through his own monologues, he makes a strong appearance in other people’s accounts of events.

3.1. **Vardaman’s Alleged or Fabled Age**

Vardaman’s age is never revealed, and readers are left to interpret Vardaman’s speech and actions based on their own estimation of his age. While informing the reader of the sibling order as well as the approximate age gap between Darl and Jewel, the story provides no information on the present age of any character, save for Dewey Dell Bundren, at seventeen (200). In order to estimate the age of her siblings, one must speculate based on the limited pieces of information the author provides. We know that Vardaman was old enough to take on some chores on the farm when Jewel was fifteen and working all nights cleaning up farmer Quick’s grounds, in order to pay for his horse. When Darl recalls this, he only gives us Jewel’s age at the time but I would not think it unfair to place it three years earlier, which would mean that Jewel and Dewey Dell are born thirteen to eighteen months apart (Faulkner 128-136). Scholars have discussed and estimated Vardaman’s age and mental development for decades, their estimations spanning six to twelve years of age, and while many seem to think Vardaman a simpleton and bordering an idiot (which is understandable if one thinks of him as a twelve-year-old), many opinions arguing the opposite have been voiced.

Based on my own observation of my two children, and my hypothetical timeline since Jewel’s purchase of the horse, I would say that Vardaman is six or seven years old at the present time of the narrative. Children of three and four years can contribute remarkably to housework when need arises, and it is not unreasonable to imagine Vardaman being at that age when he and Dewey Dell took on some of Jewel’s chores. An idea of Vardaman’s age and size is given by Cora Tull’s inner dialogue: “Not one of...
them would have stopped [Addie from going to visit her family in Jefferson], with even that little one almost old enough now to be selfish and stone-hearted like the rest of them” (23, my emphasis); and Vernon Tull’s account of Vardaman’s appearance with the fish he caught: “He slings [the fish] to the ground and grunts ‘Hah’ and spits over his shoulder like a man. [The fish d]urn nigh long as he is” (30). The idea of Vardaman being a young boy despite behaving like a man is enforced by Vernon comparing the size of the fish to him, and Vardaman is apparently small enough to be laid in a trough at Samson’s farm, when he falls asleep after a full day’s journey to the bridge that had been washed away (117).

Vardaman’s vocabulary, when speaking in passages of recorded dialogue, is somewhat limited and may not be entirely commensurable for a six-year-old, but could be explained by the lack of stimulation he gets from his environment, which is quite limited, given the nature of his family. His verbal expression becomes more elaborate in his inner dialog, which is a trait that he and his brother Darl share. The biographer Joseph Blotner calls it “poetic license” when the brothers can speak better than their literal capability would allow, but Kathryn Olsen points out that Blotner does not support well what he thinks are their literal capabilities (Blotner 638; Olsen 106). However, Vardaman’s inner dialog corresponds to my experience with my own children (now aged seven and five); the complicated thought process and philosophical questions they expose, even though they find it hard putting their thoughts and ideas into coherent or comprehensible dialogues. Children, in general, usually lack the proficiency that adults have in orally expressing their thoughts and feelings, but that does not mean they do not have them or experience them. Calling it poetic licence, what the brothers say in their inner dialogues and monologues, may therefore be an overstatement.

3.2. Portrayed as a Confused Child.

Vardaman’s appearance and speech have for long caused debates among readers, and whether his thoughts and contemplations regarding the nature of a mother make him a fool or a philosopher. Floyd C. Watkins and William B. Dillingham claim that he “is considered by layman and scholar as one of Faulkner’s famous idiots,” and name a
handful of writers who identify him as “pathetic and troubled, [and] locked in his idiocy” (Irwing Howe), “the idiot boy, [who] constantly confuses a big dead fish with his dead mother in language which is most skillfully and yet poetically adapted to his mentality” (Harry Modean Campbell), and “the moronic child, [who] confuses his mother with the fish” (Roma King, Jr) (Watkins and Dillingham 247). Vardaman’s interpretation of the fish’ existence and his mother’s transformation certainly seems unusual, but in later years he has received a vindication of a sort from a number of other scholars.

Vardaman’s role in the story may not be a leading one but it is nevertheless important, as it deepens the image given of the Bundren family, and in echoing Darl’s ideas and dialogues, balances him out in a way. While Faulkner claims that Darl “was mad from the first [and got progressively madder because he didn’t have the capacity […] of inertness to resist all the catastrophes that happened to the family,” he also claims that despite his statement about the fish, Vardaman was sane, but simply “a child trying to cope with this adult’s world which to him was, and to any sane person, completely mad” (Faulkner, “Session Fourteen, May 6, 1957” 110-11). Vardaman may appear imbecile at first, with his fish-statement and flustered speech when emotions get the better of him. His own place in the family is probably unclear to him, being a child of Addie’s body, but still not her child, given to Anse only to replace the child Addie had robbed him of (Jewel) and thennullified (Dewey Dell). After Vardaman’s birth, Addie has fulfilled what she sees as her child-bearing duties to Anse and has been ready to die since then (176). However, as she does not purposefully set her mind on dying until many years later and then dies with her eyes set on Vardaman, it is possible she was only fully ready to die when she had found she could trust that something could become of him.

Ineke Bockting points out that Vardaman grows up more or less without adult guidance; his mother never liking children and seeing them only as means of preparing to die and stay dead, and his father being absent in a different way (127). To Faulkner, Vardaman is a child that “nobody had paid any attention to, […] none of the adults would stop long enough to show him any tenderness, any affection, and he was groping and […] suddenly [his mother’s] position in the mosaic of the family was vacant”
It seems to be only the neighbouring farmer Vernon Tull who is quite observant of the boy, and Tull reveals a much deeper understanding of Vardaman than any of his own family members, and unanticipated trust:

It was that boy. I said “Here; you better take a holt of my hand” and he waited and held to me. I be durn if it wasn’t like he come back and got me; like he was saying They wont nothing hurt you. Like he was saying about a fine place he knowed where Christmas come twice with Thanksgiving and lasts on through the winter and the spring and the summer, and if I just stayed with him I’d be all right too. (139)

Of Vardaman’s ten chapters of direct appearances in the story, the shortest one is simply his famous statement “My mother is a fish” (84), about one-third into the story. In addition to these ten chapters, he appears in several others, often with his silent presence (e.g. at Addie’s deathbed). Of the other fourteen narrators, only Vernon Tull narrates at any length regarding Vardaman (the fish, Vardaman’s arrival at the Tull’s farm, the river – both Vardaman holding his hand and Vardaman’s shouts as the coffin floats away in the river). Vardaman’s own narrative and Vernon Tull’s give an extensive idea of the child’s character.

Vardaman has a tendency to state facts repeatedly, especially people’s relation to himself or the obvious (“Darl is my brother,” “Cash is my brother. Cash has a broken leg and I haven’t”) and one wonders if it is what psychologists refer to as “stimming” (stim (n.) is short for self-stimulation) and can be a way to relieve anxiety or help block out excess sensory input, but it could also be his method of clinging onto what still is present (now that his mother no longer is, then what is?). Cora Tull behaves similarly when she is constantly reminding (or justifying to) herself that the unsold cakes she baked in vain for a lady in town did not really cost her anything. The same kind of repetitive dialogue is also found in Jewel’s inner dialogue, “that goddamn adze going One lick less” (15).
4. “My Mother is a Fish.”

It is important to reconsider Addie Bundren’s key comments on words and meaning within the broader context of the novel, such as Vardaman’s statement that his mother is a fish and Darl’s comment that Jewel’s mother is a horse. Addie’s belief was that “words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at” (171), and “I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that anymore” (172). Her opinion of words being developed by someone who needed a word to understand a concept or a feeling differs from, but may nevertheless compliment, an idea proposed by the fourth century philosopher Augustine of Hippo in his work De Magistro, in a dialogue with his son: “I assert that there are two reasons for our using words, either to teach, or to remind others or, it may be, ourselves” (qtd. in Matthews 102). With words being so arbitrary, it is apparent that a fish may have many different meanings.

In general terms as a symbol, the fish is a psychic being; a “penetrative motion” endowed with heightening powers of the unconscious, or in Christian ideology, the soul swimming in the waters of life (Baldock 93-94, Cirlot 106). As A.N. Whitehead explains, mankind uses symbols in order to express itself (234). Therefore, as words are symbols and symbols are a form of expression, a fish may well stand for a mother, if understood correctly.

4.1. Coping With Loss Through Displacement

Addie sees Vardaman’s birth as being mainly her atonement to Anse, yet Faulkner gives indications that the relationship between Addie and Vardaman may have been deeper than possibly either of them understood. When Vardaman catches the big fish, his first thought is to “show it to ma” (31), illustrating her importance to him, rather than showing it to his father or older brothers as a proof that he is “a man” or “of age.” Bockting hypothesizes that Addie’s choice of name for her youngest son may come from the historic figure James K. Vardaman, who became the governor of Mississippi in
1903² and worked to improve schools, which may have influenced Addie, being a schoolteacher herself. This would indicate that she had high hopes for her son Vardaman, which may, as a result, have had a positive influence on his development (Bockting 131).

The loss of a parent is generally thought to be highly traumatic for a child, and it seems that Vardaman was never made aware of the severity of his mother’s condition. Anse pays little attention to the people around him, Jewel is in denial (“Ma aint that sick” (17)), Cash seems withdrawn, and Dewey Dell’s worries twist around her unwanted pregnancy. Even upon hearing Vardman’s direct question; “is ma sick some more?” Anse cannot get himself to answer the boy. Perhaps it is a twist of fate that Vardaman, who seems completely unprepared for his mother’s death, is the only son present during her final moment, with Darl and Jewel on an errand and Cash outside, still working on the coffin.

As a result of poor communication and a lack of nurture, Vardaman is unable to express the loss of his mother in any words. As his mind starts to grasp his mother’s passing away, he begins connecting it to other events such as Doctor Peabody’s arrival and the fish no longer lying on the ground but instead being chopped up and bleeding in the frying pan. In his first stage of the mourning process, Vardaman’s anger is displaced three times: First on Doctor Peabody; then on Peabody’s team; and finally on the farm cow, whose discomfort he refuses to ease by refusing to milk it. These displacements help him face his mother’s condition (Bockting 128). When Vardaman later brings up the connection between his mother and the fish, it is possible that he has found his own way of coping with her death, and the fact that she’s now more inaccessible than ever, by transferring his emotions and thoughts towards the fish. Reuben Ellis explains it thus:

Vardaman's “My mother is a fish” assertion clearly partakes of an affecting psychological realism in its portrayal of a child’s stunned trauma at the death of a parent. But the suggestiveness of this remark goes far beyond that limited representation. First of all, it is important to point out that

² He won the Democratic nomination in 1903, but may have formally acceded in 1904. Various other sources state his term as a governor being 1904-1908.
Vardaman's remark is far from being a strictly isolated moment in the novel. (Ellis 408-09)

The neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) put forward a theory involving a shift of emphasis from important to unimportant elements as a defence mechanism of the mind, where it subconsciously substitutes something unacceptable or terrifying with another object which is either less threatening or more easily accessible. Freud was not the first scholar to theorize about the unconscious mind but he is credited with the idea of the unconscious mind being extremely important and decisive in people’s lives.3 Freud’s interpretations of the unconscious mind are based a lot on dreams, mistakes or confusion (slips of the tongue, bungled actions), and ideas such as *transference*, whereby the patient redirects the emotions recalled towards something else, and *displacement*, which disguises repressed fears or memories (usually contained in dreams, assumed Freud) “so that they can get past the censor which normally prevents their surging into the conscious mind” (Barry 92-106). In displacement, as described by Freud, a trivial item gains mismatched or inconsistent amounts of feeling, and close proximity between two events leads to a causal connection (Lewis 14).

Although Faulkner later denied being familiar with the work of Sigmund Freud, some of his contemporaries or friends claim the opposite, and his biographer Joseph Blotner reports Faulkner as having described childhood interest in the human brain and browsing through medical books (Bockting 14). With that in mind, it is possible that Faulkner’s motive for making Vardaman displace the deceased Mother with something more tangible (the fish / no-fish) is deliberate use of psychological displacement.

Nonetheless, the studies and writings of Freud and other notable psychoanalysts of his era, such as Piaget and Lacan (both born half a century after Sigmund Freud, Lacan being a disciple of Freud’s), may not shed as much light on children’s minds as they themselves probably imagined. The philosopher Gareth Matthews explains that these three psychoanalysts seem to have had very presumptive ideas of children’s

---

3 However, there seems to be today a growing consensus that Freud’s methods, works and theories were seriously flawed in many ways.
thoughts, ideas, and understanding, using their patients’ responses and reactions to support their own theories without trying to understand why the child responded thus (Matthews 37-55).

Vardaman’s confusing contemplations about his mother’s existence may be an echo of him questioning his own (and everybody else’s) existence, and what it is that makes us what we are:

Then [the fish] wasn’t and she was, and now it is and she isn’t. And tomorrow it will be cooked and et and she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell and there wont be anything in the box and so she can breathe.

(64)

Matthews discusses a question that came up in a discussion with his six-year-old son following the death of a relative, “whether there is any part of you that you can’t lose without ceasing to exist” (86). Darl seems to struggle as well with the definition of existence: “[S]ince sleep is is-not and rain and wind are was, it is not. Yet the wagon is, because when the wagon is was, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be” (80-81, original emphasis).

4.2. Reincarnation Through Metamorphosis

The fish is a recurring symbol of rebirth in Western culture, and even more cultures have stories of shapeshifting into fish form. The motif of reincarnation as a fish is an old one, and a Christ motif in Christianity, as the notion of rebirth coming through Jesus Christ. The Old Testament tells of Jonah, who was swallowed by an enormous aquatic being after having been cast overboard a ship, in attempt to appease God, whom he had been fleeing from. God sends forth a great sea creature, which swallows Jonah alive and vomits him up on dry land three days later, after he has spent his days repenting his disobedience. Despite most modern translations referring to the creature as a whale, which may be a result of cultural adaptation, the original Hebrew text states that the Lord had prepared a great fish (dag gadol), to swallow Jonah (The Holy Bible, Jonah 1:17). His eventual exit out of the fish is a symbol of rebirth. Vardaman notes as well
that certain aspects of life have changed since the passing of his mother and her alleged transformation: “Pa shaves every day now because my mother is a fish” (102).

In Icelandic folklore the soul leaves the body after death through the last breath. Vardaman speaks of his deceased mother leaving her coffin, and it is possible that he subconsciously drilled the holes to let out her spirit:

My mother is a fish. Darl says that when we come to the water again I might see her and Dewey Dell said, She’s in the box; how could she have got out? She got out through the holes I bored, into the water I said, and when we come to the water again I am going to see her. My mother is not in the box. My mother does not smell like that. My mother is a fish. (196)


In Norse mythology, the god Loki tries to escape by shapeshifting into a fish, and similarly, Addie may be trying to escape into the river in the form of a fish. On their way back from Addie’s wake, Vernon Tull expresses his view on her death and that it may have been Addie’s only escape from Anse, and from a life she was not interesting in living:

On the way home Cora is still singing. “I am bounding toward my God and my reward,” she sings [...].
“She has hern,” I say. “Wherever she went, she has her reward in being free of Anse Bundren.” (92)

Like the African slaves of the South sung about crossing a river as a liberation from slavery, so does Addie cross a river while being liberated from Earthly life, and Anse crosses it on his way to a new life with a new wife.

There is a resemblance between the Eucharist, or Holy Communion (“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them” (The Holy Bible, John 6:56), and Vardaman’s fear of his fish being eaten (“Cooked and et. Cooked and et.”). The motif of a soul being reborn in a fish appears in a number of cultural groups, and if we look past the idea of psychological transference, his objection to the fish being
cooked and consumed may be because he does not approve of who would be granted the honour (doctor Peabody, Cora Tull, or other visitors). Faulkner may also have incorporated another old idea into Vardaman’s fear; the idea where cannibalistic tribes ate the flesh of their dead enemies, believing it would give them the strength of the dead person. Aztecs’ own oral and written history speaks much of such ritualistic behaviour, the Karankawa tribe of southeast Texas was rumoured to practice ritual cannibalism on defeated enemies, and David Scheimann writes that “[t]here is ample evidence that most, if not all, of the Indians of North-eastern America engaged in cannibalism. […] [T]he Iroquois could not bear to eat one of their own tribesmen. Since the grieving process upset the Iroquois so much, they were probably unable to bring themselves to cannibalize their own ‘flesh and blood’” (Scheimann). Although the idea of Northern-American aboriginals engaging in cannibalism may be a misunderstanding, stories have apparently circulated and Faulkner may very well have heard of them.

With ritual eating of human flesh in mind, it is therefore possible that Vardaman sees the cooking and eating of the fish, which now represents his mother, as a distribution of her strength or powers among people he deems unworthy. Tamara Slankard, suggests that Vardaman sees the “ritualistic cooking” as yet another death he must save his mother from by “hollering, swarming and clawing at Cora when he found her cooking that fish” (Slankard 20; Faulkner 86).

4.3. The Christ Metaphor and the Mother Goddess

Christian religion has, for a long time, had strong presence in the cluster of the traditionally Catholic Southern states. It is therefore reasonable to look for Christian imagery in Southern literature, such as in As I Lay Dying. The Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, has always had a more central role in Catholicism than in any other major Christian group, and while Addie Bundren may not fit most people’s idea of Virgin Mary, it is possible to see a certain Christ motif in her son Vardaman. When he discusses his mother after Addie’s death he could be referring to the Mother idea in general, rather than to his biological mother.
Even with the onset of Christianity, the concept of Mother Earth or Mother Nature as a giver of life has held its place. In Christian iconography the Church is personified as a woman, either as the Virgin Mary or as “the bride of Christ.” Earth-based religions hold the Mother Goddess, as one who gives birth to new life, in high regard.

Cyprian (c. 200-258), bishop of Carthage and a notable Early Christian writer, famously said, “[Y]ou cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother.” John Calvin (1509 –1564), a French theologian and an influential pastor during the Protestant Reformation, was perfectly willing to affirm this claim and, in truth, thought this was essential for a proper understanding of the Christian life, as it explained the relationship between the church and its believers (Chung, Sung Wook, as cited by Cortez).

I shall start, then, with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith…so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother. (Gal. 4:26) (Inst. 4.1.1)

Although Addie Bundren is not the ideal person in displaying motherly care, she did refrain from departing from this world until Vardaman was old enough to take care of himself, to a certain degree. Language itself is a symbolism, and keeping in mind that words may often be quite arbitrary, it is not strange the Vardaman brings together two symbols that at first sight may seem very different; the Mother and the Fish.

Picture 1: Vesica piscis framing the image of a saint.
Among the many manifestations of the mother-image, one of the most established ones is through her birth-giving abilities and genitalia. In Hinduism the *yoni* is a stylized representation of the female genitalia which signifies generative power and in Christian art a shape called *vesica piscis* (fish bladder, picture 1) has in particular been linked to the Virgin Mother. The *vesica piscis* is also known as *mandorla* (Italian for almond) and is an elongated almond shape that often appears as an aureole, framing icon images in medieval Christian art. The connection to the Mother comes through its visual similarity to the vulva (picture 2), through which Jesus Christ enters the world.

The shape of *vesica piscis* commonly surrounds images of Christ, and of the Virgin and baby in Christian medieval art, and can be connected to Christ in more ways than one. It is prominent in the Jesus fish, whose shape derives from the Phoenician pictograph for fish (pictures 3 and 4). The Zodiac sign Virgo (*the virgin*, picture 5) is symbolized by combining the Hebraic letter *mem* and the aforementioned Phoenician pictograph. Early on, this composed symbol became a sign representing Christ and the mystery of *His virginal birth*. The *vesica piscis* is also a figure from sacred geometry, made by overlapping two equal-sized circles (picture 6) that symbolize Heaven and Earth, or Spirit and Matter, placing Jesus Christ where they intersect. The shape may also symbolize God’s lips (by which he utters the Word), which brings us back to the lower female lips; the vulva.

*Picture 2: Yoni Sagrada (the holy yoni).*

*Picture 3: The Jesus fish.*

*Picture 4: Phoenician symbol for fish.*

*Picture 5: The symbol for the Zodiac sign Virgo.*

*Picture 6: Vesica piscis formed by the intersection of two circles.*
The letters spelling out the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ (fish) have often been seen or used as an acronym for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ, which translates as “Jesus Anointed (Christ), God’s Son, Saviour.” The ΙΧΘΥΣ-symbol in Christian art and literature dates back to the second century, and may either derive from the acronym, or have come about around the same time. If Vardaman represents Christ the Saviour, then his mother may have been reborn or reincarnated as a fish through him.

After having made the connection that the fish he caught is no longer visible (having disappeared from the ground with only a mark in the dirt to witness its existence) and his mother having died and disappeared into the coffin with possibly only the marks in her bed to witness her existence, Vardaman walks four miles late at night, in the rain, to Vernon and Cora Tull’s house to get the Vernon to affirm that the fish really had existed:

[He] hung back, dripping, watching me with them eyes. “You was there. You seen it laying there. Cash is fixing to nail her up and it was a-laying right there on the ground. You seen it. You seen the mark in the dirt. The rain never come up till after I was a-coming here. So we can get back in time.” (70)

If we look past the anterior idea linking Vardaman’s mother to the Virgin Mary, this echoes in a way the reaction of Mary Magdalene when she discovers that Christ’s tomb is empty and runs out to seek affirmation from other disciples that Christ must have risen as he predicted, as his body is gone but the strips of linen and cloth wrapped around his head remained.

On their way back home after Addie’s coffin closing ceremony, the Tulls see Vardaman sitting by the edge of a “dead” slough, devoid of all fish, with a fishing pole, his eyes round and calm.

“This aint no good day to fish,” I said. “You come on home with us and me and you’ll go down to the river first thing in the morning and catch some fish.”

“It’s one in here,” he said. “Dewey Dell seen it.”

“You come on with us. The river’s the best place.”

“It’s in here,” he said. “Dewey Dell seen it.”
“I’m bounding toward my God and my reward,” Cora sung. (92-93)

At this stage, Vardaman seems to be seeking to relive the feeling of finding a fish that he connects to his mother being alive, to replace the one he caught and has now vanished. The statement regarding the alleged transformation of his mother, however, is only put into words after he has arrived back at the Bundrens’ farm with the Tulls, repeatedly removed nails from Addie’s coffin to enable her to breathe and finally drilled holes into the lid for the same purpose when the window had been nailed so thoroughly that he could not pull them out again. Reuben Ellis points out that as Vardaman’s one-line chapter is without any context, it is hard to know exactly when this insight comes to him, but “probably comes about during the early morning hours of the novel’s second day” (Ellis 408). The dialogue is neither introduced nor followed up by a further explanation, but appears as some sort of a way out of his labyrinth of understanding, or a moment of clarity as he describes her transformation.

While the connection between the *versica piscies* and the vulva can both lead to the idea the transference of the mother onto a fish, Vardaman may also be referring to the iconic fish as a reference to Jesus Christ, through whom his mother may be resurrected after death. His philosophical wondering about existence might have been clearer, had people paid more attention to him early on. As the Bundrens and Vernon Tull approach the river with the wagon to cross it, Tull shows an understanding of children than no other character seems to have:

> Because a fellow can see ever now and then that children have more sense than him. But he dont like to admit it to them until they have beards. After they have a beard, they are too busy because they dont know if they’ll ever quite make it back to where they were in sense before they was haired, so you dont mind admitting then to folks […] that aint worth the worry that you are yourself. (139-40)

In other words, Vardaman’s claim is dismissed by all but his increasingly maddening brother, Darl, because adults are afraid to expose the weak points in the own conviction.
Conclusion

Vardaman’s idea of his mother being a fish is something that stands out in the story, despite the main focus being on the Bundrens’ ill-fated journey to bury her according to her own wishes. Although the reader may find amusement or pity in picturing the boy seeing his mother as a fish, there is good reason to argue that this outburst shows a moment of sudden insight where he realises his mother’s role, and his own, in the tapestry of life. When taking the three hypotheses addressed in this essay into account, I believe it is, in the end, up to the reader himself to favour one over another, or allow all of them to come into play when appropriate.

The idea of psychological transference may be the most reasonable and worldly explanation, and possibly the explanation many people will be the most comfortable with. This type of transference is known among psychoanalysts and has previously been documented, and psychology itself is generally accepted profession. The concept of reincarnation through metamorphosis is an old theme, and offers more alternatives. It may add an extra layer to the otherwise contemporary story of simple country people, their day-to-day lives, and short-term goals. Vardaman wonders what happens to his mother after she passes from this life, and comes to the conclusion that she must have moved on to a different life and a different state of being. The third hypothesis, the connection between Christ, Virgin Mary, and the fish, may be the one most fitting with the religious culture of the South. It may also allow for a more spiritual meaning or possibly a more personal interpretation than the other two hypotheses.

A certain criterion to the quality of work of literature can be how much the general reader can read into it. To that extent, As I Lay Dying offers many opportunities for interpretation, both in its story and through its characters. Faulkner’s character creation is so profound, that even the “village idiot” may turn out to be a prophet. In the gospels of the Bible, Jesus Christ is said to have explained that “[a] prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home” (The Holy Bible, Matthew 13:57) which underlines the fact that the only one to understand Vardaman, apart from the likeminded Darl perhaps, is Vernon Tull. Children have, throughout history, exhibited behaviour that has not been understood by adults until much later in a
different context, as many adults seem to be too focused on being in possession of all the facts or appearing wiser than their young ones. With that in mind, one must always be prepared to allow for interpretations that may differ from one’s own.
Works Cited


---. *Faulkner at West Point*. Editors Joseph L. Fant and Robert Ashley, UP of Mississippi, 2002.


Pictures


Picture 2: *Yoni Sagrada.* http://pin.it/z2_uGs5. Found on Pintrest 5 January 2017