

From fish to horses,  
what is love?: the  
bundrens' definitive  
and unusual answer



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“ He had a word, too. Love, he called it.” Although Addie Bundren dismisses the word love when used by her husband, Anse, as “ just a shape to fill a lack,” her other relationships are not as empty (172). In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner reveals the nontraditional love of Addie’s children after her death as the family ventures to bury her body in a nearby town. Often irrational, her four children struggle to cope with the death of their mother, especially when coupled with the disgraces heaped on her dead body by her selfish husband. The compassion of Vardaman, Cash, Jewel, and Darl toward their mother, however uncommonly shown, proves the authenticity of their sentiment in a way words could not. Vardaman’s immaturity and lack of guidance leads him to express his legitimate grief in unhealthy and often incomprehensible ways. Initially, Vardaman seeks to find the cause of the expected death of this mother. His ignorance and emotional turmoil lead him to blame Doctor Peabody due to his recent visit. By blaming Peabody for having “ kilt” his “ maw,” Vardaman reveals the anguish caused by the death of the mother he loves (54). In his emotional state, Vardaman, drawing on a past dramatic experience, believes Addie needs air to survive, which forces him to ask Cash if he is going to “ Nail it? Nail it?” (65). No strong adult figure emerges to explain the reality of death or counsel Vardaman, who is obviously distraught. His desperate and misguided love and loss, rather than reducing him to a melancholy stupor, instead leads him to “ save” his mother by drilling air holes in the coffin and her face (67).

However, the link Vardaman creates between his mother and the fish he caught and subsequently slaughters is illustrative of the love he maintains for his mother. Initially after Addie’s death, Vardaman mistakenly believes the disappearance of his large fish and the “ disappearance” of his mother

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are inextricably linked. The fish becomes a symbol whose existence must be verified by Vernon, a neighbor who previously sees Vardaman and the fish. Because Vardaman strongly believes that “with both of us it will be and then it will not be,” there is no doubt of the emotional significance of the fish to Vardaman (67). As this thought matures the details are simplified until Vardaman bluntly proclaims that his “mother is a fish” (84). Although not a traditional comparison used to remember loved ones, Vardaman is only capable of expressing his complex emotions in terms of events he understands. Like Vardaman, whose personal experiences shape the way he displays love, Cash’s technical skills allow him to grieve his mother’s death in equally potent though more subtle ways. In an attempt to show Addie the respect she deserves, Cash painstakingly constructs her coffin, using his wood-crafting skills to display his love and devotion. Although some characters view Cash’s decision to build Addie’s coffin within her sight as disrespectful, the “Chuck. Chuck. Chuck. of the adze” undeniably comforts Addie, who understands Cash’s affectionate action (5). Unsurprisingly, however, Cash’s logical mind is unwilling to accept the motives of his precise crafting. Instead of admitting he bevels the edges because he wants to give his mother the best, rather he enumerates thirteen reasons why a bevel is the most practical option. The closest he comes to voicing the truth is his vague thirteenth point: “It makes a neater job” (83). Even after the creation of the coffin, Cash continues to fret over its maintenance, strengthening the symbolic relationship between the coffin and his mother. After a piece of mud is flung from the road onto the coffin, Cash “scours at the stain with the wet leaves” in an effort to preserve the sanctity of the coffin, as well as the memory of his mother (109). While Cash does not feel the need to verbalize

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the strong love he has for his mother throughout the novel, it is Addie's section which proves this to be an inherent characteristic of Cash, not a product of his grief. The relationship between Addie and Cash did not necessitate the verbalization of their shared emotion, love. Because Addie recognizes that "Cash did not need to say it to me nor I to him," Cash finds other outlets, such as viewing the coffin symbolically as his mother, to express his love (172). Although Jewel, like Cash and Vardaman, uses a physical object to represent his mother, he also allows his anger to color his actions and decisions. While Cash is making the coffin outside of Addie's window, Jewel exhibits his first sign of aggression in regard to his mother's memory. Instead of recognizing Cash's true motives for crafting the coffin, Jewel angrily demands Cash "go somewhere else," as if the creation of the coffin expresses Cash's desire to see "her in it" (14). This unprovoked anger, undoubtedly a coping technique, is soon augmented by the symbolic significance Jewel places on his horse. Great thought is not required for the other characters to determine that "Jewel's mother is a horse" (95). When Darl carries the assertion farther, reminding him that "it's not your horse that's dead," Jewel erupts in anger, almost as if he can not bear to allow others to witness the depth of his devotion to his mother (94). Once the arduous steps required of Jewel to purchase the horse are revealed, the importance he places on it falls into perspective. Even with his beloved horse, however, an all encompassing anger is omnipresent in Jewel's interactions. Many of Jewel's selfless actions—like saving Addie's coffin from the river and barn fire—seem to be prompted by his love-provoked anger. Even as his mother's body rots in her casket, Jewel defends her honor, intentionally provoking a fight and risking bodily injury (228). While the other

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Bundren brothers have physical manifestations of their mother, Darl lacks these concrete links and instead views the matter philosophically. Without Addie, or at least a physical representation of her, Darl's own life loses focus and meaning; the continuity once present is erased. Initially, Darl even struggles with the idea of loving his deceased mother. Darl concludes, " I cannot love my mother because I have no mother" (95). This definitive statement does not settle Darl's active mind, however, and he quickly expands upon his notion. When discussing the subject with Vardaman, who is still comforted by his concrete fish symbolism, Darl thinks only of Addie as a " was," and because of this he concludes she " can't be is." More importantly, from this Darl proclaims, " Then I am not" (101). Linking his own existence with that of his mother is his subtle way of displaying love and grief. It is not until much later that Darl allows these thoughts to affect his actions. After more than a week tolerating the torture of Addie's dead body, Darl expresses his love through selflessly sacrificing his own freedom to end the disrespect being paid his mother. In a desperate effort to allow his mother the peace she deserves after death, Darl sets fire to Gillespie's barn, effectively trying to burn his mother's rotting carcass. Vardaman's comforting words-" Jewel got her out. You needn't to cry, Darl."-are ironic when Darl's intentions are considered (225). Through accepting the inevitable consequence, imprisonment, of his action, Darl proves his love in a way the other characters cannot even begin to comprehend. Despite the common perception, Darl's actions were not insane, but rather those of a son desperate to save his mother, even after death. While the other characters may keep their mother alive through physical manifestations that hold special significance, it is only Darl who truly thinks about the best interests of

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Addie. The ways in which Vardaman, Cash, Jewel, and Darl express love for their dead mother are, if not uniform, closely related nonetheless. With the exception of Darl, Addie's other sons rely on personally meaningful objects to provide a method of displaying their affection. While Darl refrains from using symbols, he instead takes direct action and unfortunately pays the price. Although the love of Addie's sons towards their mother is manifested in peculiarly non-traditional ways, at least they did not rely on empty words.