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Revealing the invisible: A phenomenological reading of N.B. Phuong's *The Absent* (1999) and W. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930)

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Abstract:

This article conducts a comparative analysis of the concept of invisibility within two literary works: *The Absent* (Nguoi di vang, in Vietnamese) by N.B. Phuong and *As I Lay Dying* by W. Faulkner. It employs M. Henry's phenomenological insights into life and aesthetics as a theoretical framework to delve into the expression and perception of invisibility in these texts. The study demonstrates that invisibility plays a dynamic role in both novels, exploring how it is articulated, revealed, perceived, and comprehended. By immersing characters in states of dying and coma, these narratives facilitate an exploration of the invisible as a perceptual experience. Both authors delve into the realm of invisibility by granting voices to the earth and its inhabitants, simultaneously emphasizing the silences and gaps in human communication. The central objective of this article is to identify common themes and perspectives related to the manifestation of life in these two writers' works. Both N.B. Phuong and Faulkner conceive life as fundamentally invisible, with art serving as the means to unveil this invisible life.

Keywords: invisible, M. Henry, N.B. Phuong, phenomenology of life, W. Faulkner.

Classification number: 9.2

1. Introduction

As I Lay Dying is regarded as one of the greatest novels by W. Faulkner, the winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature. The novel centres around the death of a matriarch and follows the efforts of her family to fulfil her wish of being buried in her hometown. In parallel, *The Absent* (1999) stands out as a notable work by contemporary Vietnamese author N.B. Phuong. This novel explores the behaviour and psychology of family members after the wife is involved in a severe accident and falls into a comatose state. Both *The Absent* by N.B. Phuong and *As I Lay Dying* by W. Faulkner delve into themes of disappearance, secrecy, the unseen, and memory within the context of the family unit. These shared themes create a haunting and emotional atmosphere that draws readers in.

This article's premise is based on a hypothetical scenario: What if the titles of the two novels were swapped? How would Faulkner's eerie and evocative novel be perceived if it were titled *The Absent*, while N.B. Phuong's book was named *As I Lay Dying*? Exploring this hypothetical scenario broadens one's perspective on the connections between the different categories present within the titles of these works. The article raises questions about the relationship between the dying and the absence of these two novels. Specifically, it ponders whether the concept of dying in

W. Faulkner's work is linked to the idea of absence, and whether the absence depicted in N.B. Phuong's novel could be interpreted as a form of dying. Through an examination of the various meanings associated with each category, a unifying element connecting them both emerges - an element that transcends the boundaries of the two works: the invisible. The concept of the invisible employed in this article is derived from phenomenological perspectives, particularly M. Henry's phenomenology of the invisible. M. Henry is widely recognised as a leading phenomenological thinker who has dedicated considerable attention to the concept of the invisible [1], to the extent that he can be characterised as "an ambitious attempt to develop a *phenomenology of the invisible*" [2]. The study pays particular attention to his three aspects of the invisible: the perceptual experience, its dynamic manifestation, and the eternal nature of the world. The paper seeks to identify the ways in which writers strive to create unique and distinctive literary languages to manifest the invisible life.

The subsequent sections delve into the concept of the invisible as explored in both novels, highlighting how it contributes to the writers' exploration of the nature of life. Comparative reading and text analysis are applied in this paper. Both novels reject any interest in the visible and exterior world, and they use dying and coma as conditions to support this denial. Both authors endeavour

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to delve into the voice and form of the invisible, expressing it through their work. The following part illustrates moments of revelation in the form of the invisible. The paper culminates with an examination of the writers' endeavours to visualise life as invisible, original, and eternal. These themes are concentrated in the discourse of the earth.

2. Rejecting the external world: Dying and coma

At first glance, a striking similarity between the two novels is their exploration of a family's experiences of unfortunate events centred around the life of a wife/mother. As *I Lay Dying* tells the story of the Bundren family, which begins with the death of Addie and follows the family's journey to take her body to the family cemetery in Jefferson for burial. *The Absent* centres around a family in which the wife, Hoan, suddenly experiences a severe accident and falls into a prolonged coma, with the story concluding with the woman's final moments of delirium. Both Addie and Hoan kept the secret of an affair hidden. The characters and their family members are put under tension by the proximity to and approach to death, which exposes buried secrets and loneliness.

When comparing the two works side by side, the condition of dying and being in a coma, as represented by the body, emerges as a key theme. By placing characters in states of dying and coma, both writers are seen to explore the body in a phenomenological sense, prioritising the internal, spiritual body over the external, material one. In this regard, the worlds depicted in both works become a phenomenological representation of invisible life rather than a biological representation of visible life.

The notion of invisibility can be scrutinised through diverse perspectives. M. Nitsche (2020) [1], in his analysis, provides a concise overview of several theoretical and practical discourses concerning invisibility in religious experience. Fundamentally, the concept of the invisible is addressed through three primary approaches, namely theological, anthropological, and sociological. In theology, the invisibility of the Divine highlights the *absoluteness* of the divine world over the visible world. Invisibility can be seen as "a condition of possibility of *sacred revelations* or even miracles" [1]. Cultural anthropology and sociology shed light on diverse social practices of invisibility within religious encounters. Such practices encompass "covering of one's own body" and "social hiding" [1]. In all three approaches, M. Nitsche argues, "the invisibility indicates a hiddenness of what is not directly experienced" [1]. These approaches underscore the "hiddenness", the "covering", and the limitations associated with entities that are unseen or not directly experienced.

Phenomenology presents an alternative perspective on the concept of invisibility. The works of Husserl, Heidegger, Henry, and Merleau-Ponty offer intricate and multifaceted insights into the interplay between phenomenality and invisibility. As such, the phenomenological method "does not understand the invisibility as a limit of what can be directly experienced but rather as a dynamic component of the relational nature of any experiencing" [1]. Phenomenology diverges from the previous approaches in that it does not consider hiddenness to be a fundamental element, nor does it concentrate on social interactions, but rather regards visibility as an integral part of our perceptual encounters. In contrast to the preoccupation with a focus on *appearing* and the boundary between the visible and the invisible, phenomenology is primarily concerned with the *manifestation* and the interwoven relationship between the visible and invisible.

The body is an inseparable entity between internality and externality. "At any rate, we constantly experience the fact that every phenomenon can be lived in two ways - externally and internally - with respect to one phenomenon that never leaves us, that is, our own body. For, on the one hand, I live this body internally (...) I fall completely into its pure subjectivity to the point of being unable to differentiate myself from this hunger, this suffering, etc. On the other hand, I also live this same body externally, because I am able to see it, touch it, and represent it as one represents an object, in general, as an external reality more or less analogous with other objects" [3]. M. Henry (2003a) [4] was preoccupied with the pure subjectivity and internality of the body, recognising that it is through this power that the body "constitutes the universe" and allows us to "open ourselves to this world itself" [4]. The phenomenological body, therefore, is "no longer a visible body but a flesh - an invisible flesh".

The act of placing characters in a state of dying or coma intentionally deprives the body of its ability to express its senses beyond the physical realm. Being faced with an immobile body, lying in a state between life and death, inevitably leads to confusion, unease, and tension for those in contact with it.

Both novels feature the eyes of the dying or unconscious character, giving readers an insight into the part of the body that others can observe through the senses and that displays the movements of life and spirit. It is worth mentioning that in both novels, the true life's energy in the eyes is depicted as a tendency to break out from the eyes, serving a role as a material, exterior, concrete part of the body. "Only her eyes seem to move. It's like they touch us, not with sight or sense, but like the stream from a hose touches you, the stream at the instant of impact as dissociated from the nozzle as though it had never been there" [5]. The life in the eyes is no longer of

Addie or Hoan, but enters into the life of the female eyes in the universe: "She watches me: I can feel her eyes. It's like she was shoving at me with them. I have seen it before in women. Seen them drive from the room those coming with sympathy and pity, with actual help, and clinging to some trifling animal to whom they never were more than pack-horses" [5]. Thus, it is only when the other person also closes their eyes, avoiding a physical collision with the comatose person's "open eyes" that true empathy emerges. For instance, in *The Absent*, Thang "closed his eyes, with darkness flooding him from the top of his head to his chest and covering his whole body. Amidst the vast sea of darkness, Thang suddenly realises that the situations of Hoan and Dieu are strikingly similar" [6]. The revelation becomes visible through the appearance of the invisible.

When the body becomes invisible, what remains in the two states, dying and coma, is the voice. It is the voice in the mind brought to life by literature in the form of words. Despite Addie and Hoan's biological bodies appearing as corpses from the beginning to the end of each novel, the characters' voices remain a constant presence. The voice of the dying can be seen as the central voice in a chorus of voices from an invisible universe in the two works. This will be clarified in the next section.

3. Revealing the invisible: Voices of life and silence of human

The foregoing suggests that by pushing characters' bodies into states of dying and coma, the novels pave the way for exploring the invisible as a perceptual experience. This section posits that the voices in these two works epitomise a dynamic world of the invisible.

As a phenomenologist, Henry did not focus on mere appearance when observing life. Instead, he concentrated on manifestation. For Henry, manifestation is primarily the "self-manifestation of being". By its very nature, this "self-manifestation of being" cannot appear within the visible realm of worldly exteriority; it is inherently invisible. He contends that self-manifestation is intrinsically an invisible revelation. Consequently, "invisible" becomes a foundational concept in phenomenology: "The original revelation of the essence to itself, constitutive of its reality, is the invisible. As it represents the primary revelation of the essence to itself and its reality, the invisible is not merely the opposite of phenomenality, but its primary and essential characteristic" [7]. As M. Henry (1973) [7] cites Eckhart, "the true light shines in the darkness, even if no man recognises it". M. Henry posits that true life is innately invisible, revealing itself through the invisible. This is predicated on the idea that the experience of sensing life isn't externally observable and doesn't manifest within the visible world. In essence, invisibility isn't about mere appearance or concealment, but rather a core trait of

genuine life and its manifestation. It is not a boundary of direct experience but the very force that shapes the eternity of the world.

I am akin to a flowing stream, fond of the moments before dawn when the light has yet to touch everything, and the bluish hue of an invisible body emerges suddenly in the cool, pure early dew. There was once a boy named Thang who was bathed in my essence [6].

I greet the morning with a tremble, for I hold a secret (...) I journey through this dusty world, transported to a time long past... The leaf is pure and revered above all others, for it never mates [6].

It is a confession from the Linh Nham river, or the voice of the banana leaf, in *The Absent*. The words about time and chastity are spoken with sacred and arrogant rapture. As readers delve into N.B. Phuong's novel, they are enveloped by a symphony of voices representing every being in the entire universe. "To N.B. Phuong, *banana leaves, clods, the ground, thunder, lightning, rain, clouds, morning, weevils, cows, caries, dragons, fireflies, air, fog, shoes, labels, pine trees, lights, foetuses, bells, pots, and everything else* in existence all have a voice and "act" on the environment, existing as entities no different from humans" [8]. Entities that seem inactive, without perception, soulless or non-existent, are imbued with a voice, a form, a presence. Listen closely to the breath of life that pulsates through all these creatures. Within these beings, one can find the dry branch that knows pain and "squeaks and spreads into many crumbs" [6], the sad grass that knows fear as "the grass goes madly" [6], the handful of earth that breathes and "puffs with the breath of the Ky... in the quiet darkness of the night" [6], and the forest carrying the voices of thousands of trees, with "the sound of a thousand trees whispering bringing a hearty aroma" [6]. There are also the voices of unformed souls: an unborn child who says, "I am a foetus, my mummy aborted me but I do not cry", and of past life souls asking the face of the daughter, "Were you me in the past? - Yes!" The girl's face was slightly blurred by her own response" [6]. For the inherently invisible entities, writers not only portray them to give them shape but especially transform them into talking characters, to endow them with a voice. D.C. Thi (2006) [9] wrote, "His world [N.B. Phuong] is, therefore, both empty and full, silent yet noisy, invisible yet visible, real and virtual, with yin and yang mixed".

One can read *The Absent* from various angles, such as an interest in the spiritual world, faith, or even from the perspectives of pathology or paranoia. From a phenomenological standpoint concerning the invisible, it can be understood that N.B. Phuong's novel gives form to the life of entities, nature, creatures, and phenomena that exist right beside us but which we neither know nor feel. Man, due to his sensory limitations or perhaps because

of his arrogance, has relegated all these phenomena to the invisible realm. By revealing the life of the beings in the universe, the "human" no longer retains a unique value and no longer holds the power to dominate and shape the world as in the classical view. The "human", therefore, is merely a part and a voice in the world around him. In the title *The Absent*, where "ngươi" (in Vietnamese) can be translated as "human", the phrase "di vắng" (in Vietnamese) refers to a state of being absent, whether through coma, death, fainting, or simply a lack of presence. However, this absence facilitates the manifestation of the entire universe, the earth, and all its creatures and phenomena, which are given form in the novel. "The Absent" can also be translated as "The invisible", alluding to the entire universe, a world where spirits manifest themselves in a concealed and enigmatic manner.

This perspective aligns with Henry's contemplation of other forms of life: "Is it not paradoxical for anyone who wants to know what life is to go and ask protozoa or, in the best case, honeybees? As if our only relation with life were a wholly external and fragile one with beings about whom we know nothing - or so very little! As if we ourselves were not living beings!" [10]. His interest in how the natural world connects to the ego's invisible life led him not to use the term "world", but to start referring to "earth" in *Barbarism* (1987). For Henry, "caring for nature, therefore, involves abandoning the "transcendental egoism" that confines the ego within the horizon of reason, granting him or her the power to dominate everything in the exteriority of the world" [11]. When N.B. Phuong (1999) [6] breathed life into the invisible world in his novel, he presented a more holistic view of the universe, one that includes plants, animals, phenomena, and the balance of yin and yang. They were all in search of their true selves, as the banana tree muses: "Why am I here? Why am I a banana and nothing else?".

The moment of revelation is often marked by instances of contact between humans and objects, leading to sudden and profound realisations and insights. "Son grasps the nearest cane root, uproots it, and hears the sound of the leaves clashing sharply and coldly. He shook off the soil from the cane root and held it up to examine the short roots, which resembled a scattering of crab's feet, "Eat." Then, he compelled himself to bite into the cane, and suddenly his entire body was consumed by a sensation reminiscent of a scream in the pitch-black night. One of his legs seemed to detach itself from his body, acting as though it had a will of its own" [6]. Sometimes, revelation falters when humans cannot connect with the invisible world to alleviate their loneliness. This is mirrored in the subdued desolation of Hoan and the souls: 'The girl clung once more to the nacre branch and then gradually sank into the dense atmosphere surrounding her. In *The Absent*

[6], "Hoan turned and walked away slowly, his weeping reaching the foot of the bridge before dissipating in the silence of a time that had passed" [6].

While W. Faulkner's novel is notably different concerning the revelation of the invisible world. Unlike the auditory richness of the invisible universe found in *The Absent* as mentioned earlier, this isn't the impression we receive from reading *As I Lay Dying*. W. Faulkner doesn't dedicate much space to describing nature, trees, rivers, or mountains. Perhaps, from our viewpoint, N.B. Phuong's novel showcases the distinct beauty of Oriental literature, highlighting spirituality and a harmonious view of creation, reminiscent of the Lao Trang theory. This theory stresses the balance and interconnectedness of all things in the universe. Nevertheless, a deeper contemplation of the invisible prompts us to examine the work with greater scrutiny. This realisation brings to light numerous moments in *As I Lay Dying* where humans and non-humans merge into one existence. The most succinct chapter in the novel features Vardaman's thoughts on his mother: "My mother is a fish" [5]. In an unusual manner, Vardaman equates his mother to a fish, experiencing emotions of self-degradation and defilement that mirror the sight of a severed fish writhing on the ground. Consider Tull, a poor white farmer, when he gazes upon his mule - an animal synonymous with agriculture:

When I looked back at my mule, it was like he was one of these here spy-glasses and I could look at him standing there and see all the broad land and my house sweated outen it like & was the more the sweaty the broader the land; the more the sweat, the tighter the house because it would take a tight house for Cora, to hold Cora like a jar of milk in the spring; you've got to have a tight jar or you'll need a powerful spring, so if you have a big spring, why dies, you have the incentive to have tight, well-made jars, because it is your milk, soar or not, because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that won't, because you are a man [5].

It is hard to distinguish between Tull's point of view and that of a mule. In other words, Tull identifies with the mule: the more he ploughs the field, sweats on the land, and invests in his home, the more likely he is to win a woman's heart. W.C. Dimock (2012) [12] perceives the mules as "a perfect analogy for the poor white" and continues to do so with horses, buzzards, snakes, and non-humans in the Greek epic. We should not interpret these images purely metaphorically. Rather, it's the intrinsic blending of human and non-human in the universe, although, admittedly, this idea does not really stand out compared to Faulkner's other novels, and in this comparison, it does not stand out like N.B. Phuong's *The Absent*.

Faulkner's revelation of the invisible world in *As I Lay Dying* is, in our opinion, all the more striking on the other side: the secret gaps between people. When reading *The Absent*, it is interesting to see what both works have in common: using language to reconstruct the endless invisible spaces between people. The similarities between the two novels are easily seen in their narrative techniques, such as multi-point perspective and the use of temporal equivalence between past and present. Even in most works, it is difficult or almost impossible to identify the narrator or the object being told. Most of the time, the reader has to go to the back of the story, to return to (perhaps) explain what (the external event) was told in the previous paragraph.

The story in both works contains many secrets: the dying mother concealed the secret of adultery, and every husband, child, and friend have their own pasts, sins, desires, and obsessions that are challenging to discuss. Both works feature characters with secrets, which are unveiled through live dialogue or the characters' avoidance of sharing their true thoughts and feelings with one another. Secrets also emerge on another level: between the work and the reader (the text deliberately obscures, blurs, and challenges the reader to uncover the truth). This concept is evident in *As I Lay Dying*. W. Faulkner (1930) [5] often allows his characters to tell stories in fragments, preferring to use the pronoun "it" instead of the personal pronoun that typically indicates a specific subject: "Then it wasn't. It hadn't happened then. It was lying right there on the ground. And now she's getting ready to cook it". Only on page 84, when the reader returns to Vardaman's words, do they grasp the boy's fear that his mother, represented by the fish, will be cooked. This writing style is prevalent throughout the work. Thus, a theme that pervades the work is "Words of Secrets" [12]. The ambiguity of the narrator, the object of narration, and the content narrated are pushed to an extreme in *The Absent*, perhaps because of the dense presence of invisible voices in the universe intermingling with human speech. The secretive language, or the inability to speak and understand, characterises both Faulkner and N.B. Phuong.

However, the objective of these works isn't to unearth the truth or facts (even if sought, they remain elusive). The fascination in both novels, in our view, is the acknowledgement of secrets that never disclose themselves and spaces that never fill. The bond between humans isn't solely based on physical communication through words. Silence and the absence of speech forge an unseen void between individuals, a space of absence. One could argue that they can't connect through that invisible vacuum. Conversely, within these invisible voids might lie the genuine connection between them: loneliness, mistrust, greed, deception, selfishness, and pain. The tension between members of Hoan and Addie's families is manifest in the intangible realm.

The aforementioned section suggests that both N.B. Phuong and W. Faulkner delved into the realm of the invisible, giving voice to the earth and its inhabitants, while highlighting the silences and gaps in human communication. Through attentive listening, and by endowing both invisible and visible beings, whether real or virtual, with form, voice, and vitality within the universe, these authors have engaged with phenomenology in the context of the dynamic world of the invisible. As a result, the role of humankind is redefined as a humble component of the earth. The authors use language not only to highlight the limitations inherent within language itself but also to explore the genuine connections that exist between individuals through the medium of language. Ultimately, the concept of the invisible acts as a narrative of ontology.

4. Into the essence of life: The earth

The concept of the invisible ultimately delves into questions of ontology. From this perspective, both novels can also be explored as inquiries into the essence of life. Phenomenology regards the invisible as a manifestation of life itself. In this section, we will analyse how these two works present the invisible as an intrinsic, sacred, and enduring element of existence, exemplified through the discourse on the earth. In both narratives, there is a realm of life and death, where all visible bodies eventually become invisible earth. As a result, it stands as a testament to the origin, sanctity, and eternity of life. Within the sacred and eternal earth, the shortcomings, vices, and limitations of human life are laid bare.

Firstly, the earth is the place where life is preserved. "Holding onto the earth" or "separating from the earth" is a concept closely tied to life and death. N.B. Phuong (1999) [6] wrote about the soul of the girl who died by hanging: "It was not the rope that killed the girl. All of human life is spent walking on the ground, but once we leave it, everything is finished". Leaving the earth means that humans and all other creatures are separated from the source of life. In one of the quotes above, Son pulls up a cane and "observed the small roots fluttering about like the legs of a crab," and suddenly, "his entire body lit up like a scream in the dark, and one of his legs detached as if it were an entirely independent body" [6]. W. Faulkner (1930) [5] describes the last minutes of the mules' struggle in the middle of the river during the flood season, also with their feet detached from the ground: "They rolled up out of the water in succession, turning completely over, their legs stiffly extended as when they had lost contact with the earth". W.C. Dimock (2012) [12], reflecting on the image of mules as a metaphor for farmers, said: "Mules are creatures with feet of clay. What's clear in this sequence is that because they are creatures with feet of clay, they

can only survive when they are on solid earth". And so, this image is akin to a metaphor for poor white farmers: "Once they're taken out of their environment, we know that terrible things are going to happen to them" [12]. But when juxtaposed with *The Absent*, we can consider the discourse about the earth in W. Faulkner's novel from a different perspective. It is not only associated with livelihood, but more broadly, it is W. Faulkner's reflection on the land as the place where human life and death are preserved, which will be discussed in the subsequent passages.

In W. Faulkner's and N.B. Phuong's novels, the earth serves a role beyond merely sustaining life. It also functions as the ultimate resting place for the deceased. It is portrayed as the destination where all visible bodies eventually transform into invisible ashes. Consequently, it assumes the sacred and potent role of bearing witness to the enduring and fundamental nature of life. Both works vividly depict *the journey of death* for both humanity and creation, with the earth serving as a majestic witness across countless generations.

As *I Lay Dying* is a journey to overcome flood and fire to bury the mother's body in the ground. This journey is imbued with epic and symbolic significance. "Against God" [5], despite divine will, people persist, determined and brave, in carrying their mother's body to the earth in accordance with her wishes. That woman, in her final moments, yearned for the sanctuary of the earth. This is the last spark of life in the eyes of the dying woman: "That pride, that furious desire to hide that abject nakedness which we bring here with us, carry with us into operating rooms, carry stubbornly and furiously with us back into the earth" [5]. It represents the desire to bury the exposed, visible body and return it to invisibility, to be safely preserved in the earth's eternity. "The reason for living is getting ready to stay dead" [5], Addie said. Ultimately, death returned. The invisible dust is the eternal resting place of both creation and man.

In *The Absent*, the earth becomes the repository of memory, where paths of life converge, serving as a destination for both humanity and creation to seek revelation. It is on the earth where memories are preserved. The land of Thai Nguyen narrates the story of the generations that lived and perished. Stories ranging from Princess Dien Binh in the twelfth century during the Ly dynasty to the Thai Nguyen revolt of Doi Can and Luong Lap Nham in the early twentieth century, as well as the contemporary story of Dien's family and Khanh, all coexist and unfold on the same land. The earth endures, eternally majestic, bearing witness to countless changes, births and deaths. "Dien sighed, and a hundred years ago, Luong Lap Nham sighed as well, leaning back against the wooden gun rack" [6]. Thanks to the earth, memories do not fade;

while visible forms may vanish, invisible memories persist. The earth serves as the meeting place of life and death, where past souls encounter future lives, unborn fetuses seek their mothers, banana leaves return to their wild origins, and the great forest echoes the battles of bygone armies. Hoan witnessed wandering souls, meeting their past lives at the foot of the bridge. She sought liberation, while the soul of the young girl also yearned for release from the "harsh earthen rope", but it remained elusive.

Placed within the context of the eternal earth, the visible and finite aspects of the body and the human being appear more exposed than ever. Addie's rotting body emits a foul odour, drawing vultures towards it. Hoan's body, described as beautiful and charming, also withers, emitting a foul smell and appearing unclean. "Compared to the tree of life, people become so sordid. Who would dare to throw themselves down like the pine tree, and who would possess enough willpower to rise with the same majesty? Humans fall too quickly, while trees endure, even in death" [6]. Thus, in both works, the journey of death, the return to the earth, represents a journey to the invisible and eternal.

On the sacred and eternal earth, the degradation, ugliness, and finiteness of human life are portrayed as both humorous and tragic. It is human actions that mock and infringe upon the land's sacredness. In *The Absent*, when humans violate the sacred land, they face formidable retribution. Thang's family removed the ancient wooden house, which was seen as a violation of the land's history. From that point, there was "a hunch that after her mother's farewell, something was approaching her family, a movement, a discreet but irresistible force" [6]. The land showed its displeasure through a black mass and a heatwave as they dug the foundations. Misfortune befell all family members, as if they were under a curse, seemingly from some higher power. These omens hinted at the looming end to human degradation. Each individual in that family bore their own burdens - illnesses, ambitions, deceits, and delusions - and each encountered their own form of retribution. Hoan, the adulterous woman, slipped into a coma after an accident; Thang constantly heard the voice of the crooked soldier he killed in Quang Tri; Son met his demise whilst stealing a suitcase; Khanh felt queasy; the paralysed old man... The world described in the story is "a collection of lonely blocks, each carrying their own cross on the journey to death" [8].

In *As I Lay Dying*, although there is no direct mention of human encroachment on the land, the novel satirises a sacred burial ritual found in the original legend. The funeral procession, echoing the burial of King Osiris, is depicted in *The Golden Bough* by J.G. Frazer (2009) [13]. Egyptian legend speaks of King Osiris being betrayed and slain. His kin mourned, searched for fragments of the

king's body, and performed rituals with the deceased. Osiris was resurrected and became the "Lord of Eternity" [13]. From then on, Egyptian burial rituals mirrored the ceremonies devoted to Osiris, where husband and wife, children, and friends gathered around the grieving corpse to practice rituals, hoping the deceased might be reborn. The legend and ritual of the god Osiris nourished the ancient people's hope for eternal life: "In the resurrection of Osiris, the Egyptians saw the promise of an everlasting life for themselves beyond the grave. They believed that everyone would live eternally in the afterlife, provided their surviving friends did for their body what the gods had done for the body of Osiris" [13].

The journey to bury Addie, on the one hand, revives the bond of friendship from the legend of King Osiris, where the entire family unites to lay their mother to rest according to her wishes. On the other hand, it reveals loneliness, detachment, indifference, and deceit within the family itself. Alongside them on this pilgrimage to the immortal land to attend the woman's funeral, her husband and her children each harbour their own secrets, ambitions, and personal survival strategies. Anse, the husband, wishes to get new teeth; the son hopes to earn three more dollars by offering a ride; the daughter contemplates an abortion; and the youngest child is solely concerned about his train set. And in W. Faulkner's narrative, can the deceased be reborn, as in the original myth? "My mother is a fish" [5], "the underside caked with dust where it is wet, the eye coated over, humped under the dirt" [5]. Much like Hoan, Addie finds no tranquillity, no rebirth: they bring to the earth their secrets, shame, and the humiliation of humanity. W. Faulkner's deconstruction of the reincarnation myth serves as a poignant reminder of the transient and flawed nature of human life when juxtaposed with the sanctity and perpetuity of the earth. Thus, it's evident in both novels that the earth is pivotal in intertwining the visible with the invisible, crafting a portrayal of the essence of life.

5. Conclusions

This article offers an interpretation of the notion of "invisible" in the two novels: *The Absent* (1999) by N.B. Phuong and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by W. Faulkner. The theoretical foundation of the paper largely draws from M. Henry's phenomenological understanding of the invisible, which is paramount to the concepts of life's manifestation. According to M. Henry, the invisible isn't merely something unseen or obscured, nor is it due to restrictions in firsthand experience. The invisible is an intrinsic dynamic of any experience. Life self-represents in the invisible realm, and the arts are the medium that shapes the invisible.

The study probes how the invisible in the two novels aligns with M. Henry's perspectives on invisibility. The invisible operates as an active element in both books.

The worlds illustrated in these novels are realms of the unseen, encompassing the voices of all beings, both seen and unseen, human and non-human (particularly in N.B. Phuong's novel), as well as the silence and inherent inefficacy of language and human interaction (as demonstrated in W. Faulkner's narrative). Additionally, invisibility touches upon the very core of existence. Both narratives shed light on the ephemeral, observable nature of human existence, set against the backdrop of the eternal, sacred, and imperceptible true life. To articulate these phenomenological notions, discourses around the body, voice, and earth play a significant role in both novels.

CRediT author statement

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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