An Untraditional Review of Faulkner's Text

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Keywords: Faulkner, Text, Untraditional review.

Abstract. The failure to consider the complex mother-daughter relationships in *The Sound and the Fury* has effectively nullified motherhood and daughterhood as values. Only when we recognize the methods by which mothering in all its dimensions has been "charged" and *"turned against"* women, can we hope to resist the limitations inherent in the idealized concept of a "heart's darling." The critical assumptions governing these readings offer stunning and instructive examples of how patriarchy works to preserve its values and guarantee its authority.

Introduction

If we devote some time to the relations of mothers and daughters in the work, not as a tale ancillary to the mother/son drama, we enable feminist readers and critics to begin the work, or play, of attending to female experience. The failure to consider the complex mother-daughter relationships in *The Sound and the Fury* has effectively nullified motherhood and daughterhood as values. Only when we recognize the methods by which mothering in all its dimensions has been "charged" and *"turned against"* women, can we hope to resist the limitations inherent in the idealized concept of a "heart's darling." The critical assumptions governing these readings offer stunning and instructive examples of how patriarchy works to preserve its values and guarantee its authority. Adrienne Rich marks the cost, the specific price of this practice, noting that "The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy." Bewitched, we persist in neglecting the powerful corollary of Quentin's lament: We never ask what it would mean if Caddy could say "Mother. Mother" (95). And if ever there were a book about lost daughters, surely it is this one. If Rich is correct, and I believe she is, the "cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story" (226). Faulkner's mothers and daughters suffer their own tragedies in the course of the sections, and in the Appendix, and were we to analyze the elements of *female* loss and contradiction in *The Sound and the Fury,* we might accomplish the drawing, "the picture of Caddy," Faulkner was after in his many "attempts." To read *The Sound and the Fury* with a mind to find out what it really says - and doesn't say - about women may reveal it to be an even greater "son of a bitch" than we have dreamed: *It is not just Caddy who "must do things for women's reasons too"*.

The Buried Reality of Women in *The Sound and the Fury*

Caroline Compson is merely a complaint repeated and repeated. With the exception of Jason, no character in *The Sound and the Fury* has inspired such consensus. Synonymous with "the dungeon itself," she has been blamed by demonizers from Miss

Rosa's School for Critics for the destruction of "Caddy's humanity," and even for Quentin's "refusal to conceive."Dubbing her the "villain," "repressive and punitive," Linda Wagner has said that as "a mother, Caroline Compson is a complete failure." Her behavior has been diagnosed as "pathogenic," and her "failure" and "maudlin egocentricity" have led to the "decay and disintegration of the Compsons." Her children in their suicides, mental incapacities, and disgraces are all judgments on her, and her refrain, "I wont be around much longer," claws at the psyche of a post-Freudian and mother-hating readership: she can't – and won't - be dead soon enough. The roots of Caroline Compson's despair have not interested critics nearly so much as the trial her "hypochondria" has been for the Compson family; in almost every appearance in the 1929 text, she grotesquely provides the ammunition of self-hatred, and critics have compliantly pummeled her for self-absorption, cruelty, and sanctimoniousness. She has become, at least critically, in fact, a monster, the mother of all our nightmares. Caroline Compson comes to us most immediately through the three 1928 narratives that present her as a widow and the financially strapped sister of an alcoholic and derelict brother. She is also the mother of a suicide, an idiot son, and a clerk ensconced at the town store. She is finally a grandmother. Faulkner provides all the space necessary to recognize the woman drawn in "That Evening Sun," a woman who believed "that all day father had been trying to think of doing the thing she wouldn't like the most, and that she knew all the time that after a while he would think of it." In the absence of any details about her past, Mrs. Compson is perhaps harder than usual to imagine as a woman who was at once bride and new mother. But if we cannot believe in some version of her that is attractive and potentially maternal, we have more questions to ask about Mr. Compson's perversity than the occasion of this reading will permit me to consider.

Granting that life has depleted her resources, and conceding that by 1928 she is broken, inept, and pathetic, should we not still ask whether the Mrs. Compson we have remembered is the Mrs. Compson that was always? The text offers no clues to the elements that gradually or suddenly produced the figure of a woman who calls and complains from the confines of her room and whom Quentin has suspected of watching him malignantly. We do not have her version of things any more than we have Caddy's or Miss Quentin's. We know from section one that she dreads Christmas and has always felt socially inferior as a Bascomb to the Compson line of generals and governors. The magnitude of her misery in the Compson domain is epic. She pleads with her husband to let her take Jason and go away (100-3). Her fears of marginality, which ought to prove her petty paranoia, perceived as just another occasion for her to chide, become curiously prophetic when we discover that she is largely excluded from family history in the 1946 Appendix. Mentioned only for renaming Benjy and discovering his castration too late to prevent it (344), she warrants mention for her dying, which in turn is the key to Jason's infamous racist joke: 1933 marks for Jason not so much his mother's death as the year when he is "freed from the niggers" (345). Caroline Compson as an individual in the Compson genealogy occupies barely two clauses; even Ikkemotubbe and Andrew Jackson are granted more space and interpretive history.

The Other Possible Readings of Caroline Compson

We can only speculate whether Caroline Compson, like Maud, Faulkner's own mother, imagined a heaven where she would not have to suffer conversation with the husband she had survived by twenty years, and never liked. Evidence for other possible readings of Caroline Compson exists in the text proper, but it has usually been marshaled against

her or even erased. A much cited episode in section one preserves Mrs. Compson fretfully in the act of overseeing Caddy and Benjy's preparation for an outing. In this scene, Caddy has traditionally been viewed as the caring one, intervening for Benjy against Mrs. Compson's desire to keep him inside. When Mrs. Compson exclaims "My poor baby," critics leap to prefer Caddy's attitude: "You're not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You've got your Caddy. Haven't you got your Caddy" (8—9). Mrs. Compson, in the same scene, has been faulted for asking whether Benjy is cold rather than checking him herself. Her admonitions to Caddy not to lift Benjy lest she hurt her "carriage" and that it is vital for her to learn to *think* for Benjy and herself (8) have also been seen as more evidence of Mrs. Compson's monstrousness. In fact, Caddy, who seems very eager to be out of the house, has started to take Benjy out without shoes, and Mrs. Compson has responsibly intervened. She not only asks Caddy to "take good care of him," calling Caddy "honey," but she hugs and kisses Benjy. Efforts to berate Mrs. Compson for impaired maternal skills have led most readers to overlook Dilsey's far more brutal and critical assessment of Benjy. In the scene juxtaposed to this one, Dilsey balks at any suggestion of Benjy as anyone's "baby": "You calling that thing a baby A man big as T.P." (9). Mrs. Compson's style of mothering, though cloying, is nonetheless interactive, aware. Yet we have faulted her for both indifference to her children and monstrous intrusiveness. Even her caution to Caddy not to strain herself by lifting a heavyyounger brother has served as evidence of her failed maternal instinct. It is harder to defend the Mrs. Compson who has both spied on Caddy and sent Jason to do so. She has kept her discoveries from Mr. Compson; she has even theatrically donned mourning for a solid day when the fifteen-year-old Caddy has been caught kissing a boy (230). Like so many Faulkner women, she is eager to discover sin and particularly eager to monitor her daughter's chastity. Readers of the work have recoiled from the psychological brutality in Mrs. Compson's prohibition against the use of Caddy's name in the household as a condition for raising Quentin (31). Her exaggerated posturing and mock mourning make this woman who mandates this prohibition seem less consonant with the one who orchestrates a trip to French Lick to catch a husband to legitimate Caddy's pregnancy, and who also goes on to play mother-of-the-bride to a coquettish hilt during Herbert Head's visit to the family. At the very least, Quentin's section preserves a mother working very hard to get Caddy married, one nearly galvanized by the prospect of disgrace should Herbert get away. She conspires with, or for, Caddy and the granddaughter-to-be, in order to secure Herbert Head and his wealth. Uttering all the cliches of feminine hospitality and flattery, this mother-in-law as belle bears little resemblance to the woman who reportedly watches from a window, the woman unable to bear it. In fact, this Mrs. Compson plays out the scripts imposed by male fantasy (134): "You needn't be jealous though it's just an old woman he's flattering" or "Unless I do what I am tempted to and take you instead I don't think Mr Compson could overtake the car" (95); if her script is grotesque, she has only accommodated the demands for masquerade required by the patriarchal economy. Valued by the solid economy only for maternal qualities and "femininity," women, according to Irigaray, lose themselves and keep their own desires mute: "chosen as an object of consumption or of desire" women are expected to make whatever *efforts* are required to achieve the roles and images necessary to support the "infrastructure." The masquerade manifests itself as a perversion of female desire. Mrs. Compson devotes all her energy to making the match work. Punishing Caddy for her pregnancy is not even a remote consideration. In her efforts to accomplish the marriage, she observes all the feminine behaviors she hopes will please her daughter's suitor. She is a different women in capability and

conception. The scene tells another part of the mother-daughter story, and it is only one of the possible stories nascent and implicit in the several sections.

Conclusion

Only through Jason's account do we learn of the capricious and punitive Mrs. Compson. His version, however, has shaped our sense of the character more powerfully than the others. Readers compelled to see her as a villain have failed to ask why the divorce from Herbert Head would precipitate such fatal resolution in her dealings with Caddy, or even why a woman who has exercised her power primarily through illness would succeed in persuading Mr. Compson to consent to these harsh terms for his daughter? And why, of all the requests Mrs. Compson seems to have made of Mr. Compson, is this the one he acquiesces to? Where is the Mr. Compson whom Caddy reminds Jason of, the one she wouldn't "have to ask... twice? once, even" to take care of Quentin (209). We know neither the how nor the why of Mrs. Compson's machinations to enforce the banishment, or, in fact, even the "if." Her actions in this section highlight other significant mysteries. Why, for instance, having discovered in 1910 her power to dictate the terms of her world, does Caroline Compson devote her remaining years to a petty tyranny over Dilsey and to ongoing squabbles with Jason about how to rear Quentin? Jason reminds her that the impression the school has of her as a disciplinarian is correct: she is unable to control Quentin and apparently "never tried to do anything with her" (180). Nothing in the text provides a plausible reconciliation of the character as she was and as she now seems to have become. Though the text reveals much, it does not provide compelling explanation for why the mother denies her daughter access to the daughter's own child. Does Mrs. Compson truly believe she is doing it for Quentin's sake, or for Jason's, or is it "what she owes" to her husband's memory (220)? The explanation we have comes to us through Jason's account and through the vague reference made by Dilsey to Roskus in section one. Though she opposes the prohibition against Caddy, Dilsey does not clarify how Mrs. Compson has prevailed, nor why she, Caddy, and Mr. Compson have not offered greater resistance to or subversion of the policy. Only Jason, who clearly profits, exhibits clear motivation and detail about how Caddy is thwarted. It is an interesting anomaly that though Jason's own track record for success is generally poor, he has nevertheless managed to keep all the women checkmated for seventeen years through his dubious cunning.

References

[1] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. 226.

[2] Ben Wasson, *Count No 'Count: Flashbacks to Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), p. 84.

[3] In Irigaray's " 'Frenchwomen,' Stop Trying"*(This Sex,* pp. 198-204), she urgently and impishly counsels perversity as a strategy against therepetition of the same.

[4] See Noel Polk's " 'The Dungeon Was Mother Herself: William Faulkner 1927-31," in *New Directions in Faulkner Studies, 1983.*

[5] Sally Page, *Faulkner's Women: Characterization and Meaning* (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, 1972), p. 65.

[6] Philip Weinstein, " 'If I Could Say Mother': Construing the Unsayable about Faulknerian Maternity," in *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium*, ed. Lothar Honninghausen (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1989), p. 6.