A Different Interpretation of *The Sound and the Fury*

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Abstract. *The Sound and the Fury* have stood faithful vigil, invoking Faulkner's variations on the creed. In most essays on the work there is the near-obligatory Caddy who is brave, the Quentin who loved some concept of Compson honor, the Mr. Compson who reminds us that no Compson ever disappointed a lady, and the *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury* bellowing, ricklickshun, doomed, damned, first and last. They [the critics] endure, offering fellow Faulknerians extraordinary and comforting consensus about the Compson boys, Caddy's energy, and Dilsey's strength, along with breathtakingly unanimous as sessments of Mrs. Compson, who has served faithfully as the Rotten Mother for critics to rail against.

Introduction

In its sixty years of public life, *The Sound and Fury* has inspired different degrees of enthusiasm. From early assessments that judged it "a trifle unhealthy"[1] to others that found it "down-right tiresome,"[2] it has managed to remain, even in these days of canon cross fire, in the expropriated words of Faulkner, "our heart's darling"- a book "we" love to teach.[3] To write about it in 1992 is to confront the critical monolith, made worse now because there seems little left unsaid about a work that properly, intentionally, and "officially" failed.[4] Even the book's own designated heart's darling, Caddy herself, has endured a contested critical history: she has been both examined as the source of Comp son ruin and elevated to the status of "the beautiful one." Each critical construction of her has been replicated many times over.

The Denial of Caddy's Narrative Voice

Faulkner's decision to deny her a narrative voice has worked to spawn dozens of apologias which seek to demonstrate that her absence is central, *central* to the novel, central to the brothers' lives and memories, central to the structural strategy of the work, central to its rhetoricized tragedy,[5] central even to the fall of the South.[6] Faulkner aided and abetted this compelling interpretation when he claimed to have written the book to appease his haunted desire for a sister that never was, for the daughter he lost, and who – in the ritualized telling - became the metaphorically beautiful urn which in turn became, finally, something to die for or with. Scholars of *The Sound and the Fury* have stood faithful vigil, invoking Faulkner's variations on the creed. In most essays on the work there is the near-obligatory Caddy who is brave, the Quentin who loved some concept of Compson honor, the Mr. Compson who reminds us that no Compson ever disappointed a lady, and the *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury* bellowing, ricklickshun, doomed, damned, first and last. They [the critics] endure, offering fellow Faulknerians extraordinary and comforting consensus about the Compson boys, Caddy's energy, and Dilsey's strength, along with breathtakingly unanimous

as sessments of Mrs. Compson, who has served faithfully as the Rotten Mother for critics to rail against. The mystique that surrounds certain elements of the book's genesis - the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers - and some maxims about the book's message are at least partly responsible for its canonical status. Eric J. Sundquist calls Faulkner's story about the novel's inception the "genetic myth" that has "overwhelmed the novel itself"; and he has gone on to charge quite heretically that the novel "offers few philosophical ideas of lasting concern." But even if its ideas are not lasting, the critics' concern with them certainly has been.

A Different Text's Interpretation

Certain views on the novel have been reworked so frequently that they have become virtual articles of faith that direct our readings and preempt substantive controversy. The critical fetishizing of despair has produced an aesthetic affirmation that keeps the book on the academy's hit parade. Yet, in so relentlessly unifying *The Sound and the Fury* around traditional expectations for tragedy and standards of modernism, critics have done it a disservice: by homogenizing its complexity and sidestepping its discrepancies, they have undermined Faulkner's intentions. Rather than enabling Faulkner to slam the door to the publishers' addresses and book lists, academic institutionalization of *The Sound and the Fury* has guaranteed that Faulkner would show up semester after semester on reading lists every where. We have rewarded his daring by impressing the book that cost him "the most grief" into the service of a cultural status quo. Regularly drafted to shore up the beatitudes, *The Sound and the Fury* has permitted academic champions of truth and beauty to find overriding coherence and enduring truth in the very structures Faulkner dreamed would thwart bourgeois convention. In this essay, I should like to tamper particularly with another of the critical myths that have overwhelmed *The Sound and the Fury,* the fiercely defended notion of the book's coherence, or at least of a coherence accomplished through an unshakable faith in Caddy's centrality and unity. To challenge the book's status as unified text and to focus attention on a plot overshadowed by the culturally privileged saga of sons, I intend to reframe each narrative section and search out discrepancies and ruptures in the depiction of the Compson women who shuttle in and out of the sections waiting to be summoned from the textual perimeters for service in the male symbolic. Because so many of the book's stories interlock, my method is irresistibly recursive; but since my task is re-vision, I need to pursue differences in conception and emphasis in the representation of the Compson mothers and daughters. By unearthing the stories grounded in the work's record of female experience, I can explore the ways the mother-daughter plots subvert cherished assumptions about the unity of the work. I have chosen to reclaim each of the units for a different Compson woman; I have imagined for each of the sections a day which reflects a woman's stake in the narrative. By recognizing the pervasive presence and importance of the Compson women, I hope to highlight the traditional resistance to their integration, and to stake out actual fictional territory for them: Benjy's "Good Friday" will become Caroline Compson's "Mother's Day."

The Unified Reading of Caddy Distorting the Reality

In the reclamation project, I hope to allow us to see again, or for the first time, Caddy of the muddy drawers, Benjy's Caddy, who has been so critically enshrined in the readings of the work that she has become inseparable from the Caddy breathing o'er Eden, Quentin's Caddy. And Quentin's Caddy, who was "always a king or a giant or a general,"[12] has inevitably and

naturally merged with Jason's Caddy in section three, where she is powerless, at his mercy, futilely pleading with him to be kind to her child. The defiant little girl, braver than the brothers and cherished by the critics, bears little resemblance to *this* woman, also known as Caddy. By "April Eighth" a/k/a section four a/k/a Easter Sunday 1928, Caddy has been so radically metamorphosed that she exists only as provocative and tortured sound. Progressively destroyed in each successive representation in the 1929 text, she completes the negative spiral of a woman who has tragically failed everyone, however inadvertently. To view Caddy as a unified, single figure, as the criticism has done, distorts, even erases, in practice and spirit, possibilities for understanding Caddy and the complexities of female experience. Each of *The Sound and the Fury's* varied representations of Caddy's departures, disappearances, or removals from the Compson household has led readers to improvise a coherent and unified Caddy that coherently explains Benjy's bellowing, Jason's rage, Quentin's suicide, and the bleakness of the final section.

Close attention to the distinct Caddy in each separate section reveals that her whereabouts are strictly unaccounted for; she does not add up; she can't be reconciled - she is more than one. Caddy has been understood as a sister who climbs a tree, who becomes unvirgin, or who is once and always a bitch. But understanding this depends on a logic supplied by the reader that the text does not bear out. Readers have found it easier to believe in a Caddy "somewhere" brave, doomed, and beautiful than to confront the contradictions her character embodies. Conditioned to recognize her as familiar, readers, with Benjy, bellow at her invocation and continue to believe she smells like trees, even when she is redolent of honeysuckle and rain, even when she smells like nothing at all. That readers have not been troubled by highly discrepant versions of her behavior and unaccounted for changes in her character underscores how thoroughly our attention has been diverted by the male rhetoric that fills the space vacated by the perpetually and variously absent Caddys. For all the attention we have paid to *Caddy,* we have barely seen her. We recognize her only because we have helped make her, colluding in the construction of her as a beautiful little girl *cum* urn. This transformation of girl into urn - an apotheosis of art transcending loss - accomplishes a distortion that Luce Irigaray sees as the necessary *"blurring"* of females in order to produce the *same,* which is the unified idealism demanded by patriarchal culture.

By rendering the different versions of Caddy the *same,* readers have both thematically and technically fostered a specious sense of the book's coherence. Convinced of its "oneness," readers have suppressed considerations that are incompatible with the dominant mythology, readings that might significantly "jam the machinery" of the ideal hegemonic readings designed to secure allegiance to unity and systematicity. We have been complicit far too long in reproducing *The Sound and the Fury* as a monument to high modernism, a sacred text unifying and celebrating a male despair rooted in and at the expense of female difference. Prevailing myths of *The Sound and the Fury* have enshrined Caddy in a kind of death in life, justified her silence, and stamped her as doomed, isolated out of the loud and vital world of possibility. My resistance to a single Caddy is not a fanatical de-essentialism. I do not think she has been merely altered by the years, real and imaginative, separating her from Faulkner's original inception. Though Faulkner used this claim himself to account for Caddy's differences when he dodged queries about factual discrepancies in the work, I think there is more to be gained by refusing his claims of increasing familiarity, that he simply knew her better by the time of the Appendix than he did in 1929. Rather, I'd like to argue that Caddy never has been one. Existing in fluid subversion, flowing between and around and even against the accounts of her

that attempt to contain and unify her, the contradictory Caddys resist finality, closure, and coherence. Our need to see her as one, with a past and a certain negotiable value in an economy based in the masculine imaginary, tells us a lot about how we deny alternatives and challenges to female experience that threaten the prescriptive authority of the masculine imaginary. Suppose Caddy is present in a variety of her contradictions, different and untranscendent in each of the sections, and that she is not the only woman who is more than merely one. Suppose Faulkner employed the Compson women with no regard to the rules of the novel and character as he knew it. What happens if we see Mrs. Compson as both good mother *and* selfish woman, and Quentin, her granddaughter, both as victim and freedom fighter? Compelled to reconcile, legitimate, and *make sense*, we have captured Faulkner's characters in readings that struggle to make his art consistent, to make his characters cast shadows. As a result we find familiar motivations, discover consistencies where none may exist, where none were perhaps intended to exist. Not unlike Joe Christmas, we have managed to arrive always at our point of departure with *The Sound and the Fury;* looking up Caddy's dress for the answer, we have found the story of the two lost women that Faulkner told us was there. We have irresistibly and inevitably ended by reporting the story that accompanies – rather displaces - all other stories: the story of exquisite and valorized male suffering, the story of men, men moaning, men forced to buy flatirons and finish the term at Harvard, and men standing in poison ivy. We dismiss inconsistent data contravening the official and familiar sense of the characters and surrender ourselves to what we have convinced ourselves they ought to be saying and doing. We sacrifice complexity to the aesthetic need to see both Caddy and her "novel" as something *to die for*. And so I propose a variation on Mr. Compson's Thoreauvian advice to Quentin that he take an econo-vacation in Maine and defer suicide. My excursion for recovery's sake launches us toward Irigaray's exteriority, the realm beyond the male imaginary.

Conclusion

By upsetting arrangements and emphases that have privileged formal coherence and thematics of loss, I hope to plumb some eddies of female disruption within the sections of the 1929 edition and the Appendix, and ask some different questions. By mapping these disruptions in Faulkner's own constructed territories, I hope to locate some Caddys and Mrs. Compsons and Quentins different from the ones we have assumed were authorized. Faulkner, as owner and proprietor, set the boundaries of his familiar "somewhere," but I would like to explore its "elsewhere," the out-of bounds, where the branch that sweeps Caddy away really begins.

References

[1] Clifton Fadiman, "Hardly Worth the Wait" in *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family,* ed. Arthur Kinney (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), p. 93.

[2] Winfield Townley Scott, in *William Faulkner: The Critical Heritage,* ed. John Bassett (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 82.

[3] Philip Weinstein presented this argument at the 1990 American Literature Association meeting in a talk as yet unpublished entitled "Canon Musings: Why Is *The Sound and the Fury* 'Our Heart's Darling'?" See also Weinstein's *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[4] See Polk's introduction to this volume.

[5] For examples of this approach, see Douglas Messerli, "The Problem of Time in *The Sound and the Fury:* A Critical Reassessment and Reinterpretation," *Southern Literary Journal* 6.2 (Spring 1974): 37-41; see also Carvel Collins, "The Interior Monologues of *The Sound and the Fury,"* in *English Language Institute Essays 1952,* ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), pp. 53-6.

[6] See Eileen Gregory, "Caddy Compson's World,' in *The Merrill Studies in The Sound and the Fury,* ed. James B. Meriwether (Columbus, Ohio:Charles E. Merrill, 1970), pp. 89-101.