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Through a Piece of Colored Glass: An Analysis of Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*

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Abstract

*The Sound and the Fury* is William Faulkner’s story of the Compson family’s downfall in the American South during the early 20th century. The novel illustrates the impact on the cultural identity of the South of strictly defined social roles and the tension they created in the aftermath of slavery and defeat in the Civil War. In my analysis, I have chosen to focus on gender issues, especially in their Southern manifestation. The Compsons’ daughter, Caddy, figures prominently in the sons’ narratives, but is only portrayed through their perceptions and memories. My aim is to determine Caddy’s significance in the novel by exploring her relationships with her brothers, as seen through their eyes, and how she is characterized by them.

In Benjy’s narrative, I examine her actions as a little girl in light of the Eve myth and the icon of the virgin mother. Quentin’s obsession with Caddy's sexuality as a teenager reveals the implications of associating female sexuality with death, the role of language in reproducing and combating established gender power structures, and the impact of traditional gender roles on women and men. Jason’s binary categorization of women as virgins or whores turns the few glimpses of Caddy as a mother into that of a woman treated as a commodity of exchange. In each of their narratives, Caddy is a dynamic character whose words, body, and actions expose prevailing social and gender power struggles. By conjuring her presence through her absence, her brothers reveal the depth and destructiveness of the social imperatives that underlie their attempts to control her. I suggest that Caddy’s role in the novel is to disrupt the brothers’ narratives and challenge the underlying Southern social and gender constructs that imbue them.
William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is considered by many to be one of the Nobel laureate’s masterpieces. The complex story of the Compson family’s downfall takes place in the American South during the early 20th century. The novel raises many issues, relevant and controversial then and now, especially of race and gender, and illustrates the impact on the cultural identity of the South of strictly defined social roles and the tension they created in the aftermath of slavery and defeat in the Civil War. As Diane Roberts explains, “From the 1830s on, southern society told itself stories justifying its way of life, insisting on its divisions between classes, genders, and races. The South resisted emancipation, delayed ratification of women’s right to vote and concocted laws that designated race according to (in some states) one-thirty-second part of “black blood’” (xiii). Although I do believe aspects of the novel lend themselves to psychoanalytical interpretation, this essay will consist of an analysis of Caddy Compson that will focus on gender issues within the cultural context of the novel. As Roberts writes about Faulkner’s work, his “questioning, his attempt to ‘write the feminine,’ endangers the categories on which the South built its power” (xiii).

The Compson’s daughter, Caddy, figures prominently in the sons’ narratives, but is only portrayed through their perceptions and memories, even though she plays an arguably pivotal role in *The Sound and the Fury*. Caddy, both utterly present and strangely absent, is seen and can be understood as if through a piece of colored glass. My aim is to determine Caddy’s significance in the novel by exploring her relationships with her brothers, as seen through their eyes, and how she is characterized by them. I will examine their narratives in the order they appear in the novel since Benjy, Quentin, and Jason focus on successive periods of her life. The character of Caddy has no narrative voice; in this void we see how women’s social existence was dependent on male acknowledgement, exemplifying Toril Moi’s assertion that “Woman is not only the Other, as Simone de Beauvoir discovered, but is quite specifically man’s Other: his negative or mirror-image” (133). Each brother uses Caddy as a mirror to reflect his own obsessions, but she in turn reflects back the causes of their undoing. I suggest that Caddy’s role in the novel is to disrupt the brothers’ narratives and challenge the underlying Southern social and gender constructs that imbue them.

Benjy narrates the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*: “April Seventh, 1928.” He is retarded and apparently cannot talk. He seems incapable of inferring the motivations of others. Benjy’s experiences are presented as unedited sensory impressions. As Deborah Clarke writes, “His mental deficiencies render him unable to conceive of language as a symbolic structure; for him, it is a literal expression of what he sees and hears” (24). Although Benjy’s experiences seem devoid of subjectivity, his memories are tellingly selective, as most center
on Caddy before she loses her virginity. Throughout the day, fragmented memories are inter-
mingled with present events, which he “appears to experience as one of a series of 
coincidental presents” (Roggenbuck).

Caddy’s significance in this section is illustrated in part by Benjy’s earliest memory, the
day of his grandmother Damuddy’s death. Benjy watches Caddy and Quentin play by the
stream with Versh, son of Dilsey, the family servant. Versh and Quentin warn Caddy she will
be whipped for getting her dress wet. In her typical bravado, she scoffs at the notion, but then
decides to take off her dress to let it dry, despite her brother’s threats. Quentin’s anger over
his sister’s immodesty is compounded when she coerces Versh into unbuttoning her dress; as
Roberts argues, “the picture of a black boy undressing a white girl in front of her brothers
goes to the heart of southern sexual taboos” (116). Quentin slaps her for undressing, an early
indication of his later obsession with her purity and his attempts to control her sexuality. After
the incident, Benjy is upset when he sees that “Caddy was all wet and muddy behind” (Faulk-
nner 19). He is the first to notice her dirty drawers, which symbolize her inevitable fall from
grace, “prefiguring menstruation, the ‘taint’ of female sexuality and pollution” (Roberts 116).
Benjy’s distress expresses a need he can neither articulate nor understand: that Caddy remain
pure and unchanged. As Roberts argues, “Without knowing the words for it, Benjy is just as
obsessed with her virginity as Jason, Quentin, and Mrs. Compson” (115). This is emphasized
by his calm acceptance when Quentin slaps her for the immodesty of taking off her dress.
Benjy’s silence implies that on some level he approves of the punishment, while Caddy’s re-
fusion to obey Quentin and her rebellion against his punishment show that she is already
spirited, headstrong, and independent, at only seven years old.

Caddy’s character is further illustrated after they return from the stream on the evening of
Damuddy’s funeral. Caddy becomes impatient with the evasive answers to her repeated ques-
tions about why they must be quiet and why they have visitors. She decides to climb the tree
to look through the window and find out for herself. Versh reminds her that her father told her
not to climb the tree, but she dismisses him, saying: “that was a long time ago. … I expect
he’s forgotten about it. Besides, he said to mind me tonight” (Faulkner 39). She uses the au-
thority granted her by her father to disobey his wishes. Caddy’s disobedience and desire for
knowledge become sinful and dirty in the minds of her brothers. As she climbs the tree, the
others “watched the muddy bottom of her drawers” (Faulkner 39). Her brothers’ obsessions
with her transgressions fuel their narratives: “her dirty underwear creates a lasting impression
… and returns as the emblem of her disobedience” (Medoro).
When Caddy climbs the tree, I am reminded of Eve and the tree of knowledge, which is supported by Stephen M. Ross and Noel Polk’s observation that the combined images “suggest that the scene is Faulkner’s replication of the Garden of Eden” (26). Before she climbs the tree, the children see a snake slither from under the house; when Dilsey finds the children, she scolds them and teasingly calls Caddy “Satan” (Faulkner 45). Roberts explains the connection of Eden with the cultural heritage of the South when she writes that during Reconstruction “the white South reimagined itself as a wrecked Eden, but in the twenties and thirties … that reimagining was under strain” (22). The chastity of the daughters of white, upper-class families was therefore given additional symbolic importance signifying enduring morality in the face of defeat (Roberts 103-04). The Caddy in Benjy’s narrative is disobedient, brave, and hungry for knowledge, and like Eve cast out of Eden, she is later disowned by the family, another symbolic Paradise, for her sins: her illicit pregnancy is revealed and thus her failure to bow to the social strictures put upon white ladies in the American South at that time.

On the surface, comparing Caddy to Eve might be interpreted as reinforcing patriarchal ideology, but I believe it has the opposite effect. Caddy’s loss of virginity triggers Benjy’s earlier memory of his name change, when Versh tells Benjy, “They making a bluegum out of you,” just like when “in old time your grandpaw changed nigger’s name” (Faulkner 69). The story of the bluegum’s supernatural power is not a nostalgic look back at a lost Paradise, but rather a legend derived from the horror of slavery, a sin committed by the patriarch. While not written about The Sound and the Fury, Beth Ann Bassein’s Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature presents germane arguments. She writes that the Eve myth places “squarely on the shoulders of one sex the responsibility of inflicting pain, struggle, death, and damnation through all time” (20). Although Caddy is blamed tacitly by Benjy, and outright by Quentin and Jason, she is not the source of their problems, which is rather their obsessions with her perceived sexual sins. The novel does not offer a tidy, binary characterization of Caddy: she is not presented as the cause of her family’s downfall or the agent of their salvation. And yet the pregnancy that leads to her banishment – or escape – from the family creates the family’s only way out. As Dana Medoro argues, it is through Caddy and her daughter that the family has “the possibility of resurrection, and this possibility is placed not in the son’s domain but in the daughter’s.” Since Benjy is castrated, Quentin commits suicide, and Jason is a confirmed bachelor, Caddy and her daughter represent hope for the future, however uncertain. As such, I believe the novel offers a subtle criticism of the myth of Eve –
woman – as the cause of man’s downfall, as it depicts the crumbling of the South’s most cherished myth about itself as Eden destroyed.

Another aspect of the novel that can be linked to Christian patriarchal ideology is the emphasis placed on Caddy’s chastity. For Benjy, Caddy’s purity is directly associated with the smell of trees. According to Roberts, “It is evidently her very virginity that causes her to give off that scent …” (116). After he sees her muddy drawers by the stream and cries, she crouches in the water and comforts him, incidentally washing away her sins in a symbolic baptism, and Benjy thinks she smells like trees. When she is fourteen, she uses perfume for the first time, which upsets Benjy and makes him cry. When Caddy again unintentionally purifies herself by bathing, she smells like trees again, and Benjy becomes calm. When she sits at her vanity to reapply the perfume, he begins to cry again. Only then does she realize why he is upset and has him give the scent to Dilsey, telling her, “We dont like perfume ourselves” (Faulkner 43). Caddy “connects her desires to Benjy’s, pretending” and enters a world of imagination and play for Benjy’s sake (Gwin 44). However, her interactions with him change drastically when she begins to see herself as a sinner.

The first time Benjy’s tears give rise to Caddy’s self-recrimination is after he interrupts her during a sexual encounter. In response to Benjy’s increasing agitation, she finally runs home with him. She holds him while they both cry and promises she will not act that way again: “I wont. … I wont anymore, ever” (Faulkner 48). Again, she does not have the scent of innocence until she purifies herself: “Caddy took the kitchen soap and washed her mouth out, hard. Caddy smelled like trees” (Faulkner 48). This third purification ritual is intentional and now includes an element of self-punishment. It is unclear how much Benjy has seen, or exactly what Caddy has done, but presumably she is still a virgin, since she is still able to wash away her sins. Caddy’s attempts to conform to Benjy’s needs have now transformed from pretence into punishment, showing that she is no longer simply curbing her behavior to please her brother. She is torn between opposing forces: the longing to satisfy her sexual desires and the fear of violating the patriarchal value assigned to female chastity.

Caddy’s primary role in Benjy’s life is that of a mother figure, even though she exhibits some traditionally masculine traits in her relationship with Benjy: she is his protector and a voice of authority. But I agree with Minrose C. Gwin, who argues that “her voice carries this referential weight because she speaks from the position of the mother” (43). The primary goal of Caddy’s attempts to use language to communicate with Benjy is to provide him with maternal care. After she reminds him to keep his hands in his pockets on a freezing day, she holds a piece of ice to his face, telling him, “Ice. That means how cold it is” (Faulkner 13).
She does not arbitrarily define ice; she does so to help him understand her nurturing advice. She is also motivated by a desire to nurture him when she encourages him to express himself with language. When Benjy cries about her perfume, she urges him to use language to communicate his frustrations so that she can take better care of him: “What is it, Benjy. … Tell Caddy. She’ll do it. Try” (Faulkner 41). Her attempt to give him language is like that of a mother trying to teach an infant. As Gwin points out, Caddy “speaks what Kristeva has called ‘maternal language’ out of the maternal space created in Benjy’s discourse” (41). While she is a little girl, Caddy likes playing mother to Benjy, gladly taking on the responsibility of caring for him that should belong to their parents. By engaging with him, she builds a bridge between him and the outside world. She repeatedly tries to conform to his needs, to please him and care for him, until her own needs finally overpower her motherly feelings.

Each of Benjy’s memories of Caddy is linked to her purity or her role as a mother figure. After she has premarital sex, she is no longer able to comfort him. There is nothing she can do to soothe him or stop him from crying, which renders her mute. Benjy does not remember one word Caddy says to him after she loses her virginity; her loss of innocence is the death of their bond. When he bellows outside at her wedding, Caddy tries to hold Benjy and comfort him, but he is inconsolable: “I couldn’t smell trees anymore and I began to cry” (Faulkner 40). Benjy’s tearful protestations show his need for her to remain his virgin mother. His apparently instinctual idolization of Caddy has deep roots in Western tradition. Clarke explains, “… Western culture idealizes mothers but condemns female sexuality. As Julia Kristeva has pointed out in ‘Stabat Mater’ (Reader), the cornerstone of Christianity is the virgin mother, an icon perpetuated by a patriarchal system in an effort to deny women’s sexuality as a necessary ingredient of motherhood” (23). Clarke believes this denial of female sexuality is why Caddy’s family reacts so strongly to her becoming a mother, but I believe it most particularly and aptly applies to Benjy’s idolization of his sister. A further indication of Benjy’s symbolic connection to the icon of the virgin mother is that the day of his narrative is his thirty-third birthday, the age at which Jesus is traditionally believed to have been crucified. Benjy’s need for Caddy to be his virgin mother is so strong that he deprives himself of his only source of comfort rather than accept her love after she is no longer unsullied. In this way, the novel criticizes the denial of female sexuality as represented by the icon of the virgin mother and may be an illustration of how deeply the ideal of female chastity was embedded in Southern culture, as it could be reproduced even in a man bereft of language and cognitive skills.

Quentin’s narrative, the second section of the novel, jumps back in time to “June Second, 1910.” Although he has physically left the South to attend Harvard, as Noel Polk observes,
nearly everything that happens to him … brings him instantly back to scenes of pain at home” (“Trying” 153). Unlike Benjy, who becomes immersed in episodes from the past seemingly unchanged by time, Quentin’s thoughts are intruded upon by remembered and imagined “telling moments from the past … in degrees of intensity, of psychic pain” (Polk, “Trying” 149). Most of these moments are fragments of painful memories of Caddy and conversations about her with his father, to whom he looked in vain for validation of the patriarchal values of the Old South. As Doreen Fowler argues, “Quentin looks backward with nostalgia to a time when he imagines that male will held unchallenged sway, a time before the abolition of slavery, a social institution that promoted the myth that power is naturalized in the white male body” (95). His longing for the “static serenity” of the past is intertwined with his conflicted feelings of jealousy, fear, fascination, and disgust with Caddy’s sexuality (Faulkner 87).

As it is for Benjy, Caddy’s first sexual experience is the metaphorical death of Quentin’s bond with her. Although Quentin is intelligent and articulate, he has much in common with Benjy. Like his brother, whom Quentin believes “took one look at her and knew” (Faulkner 100), Quentin is also devastated by Caddy’s loss of virginity. The continuing theme of connecting Caddy to the Eve myth is apparent when he thinks, “Then we were all poisoned” (Faulkner 102), and when the pear tree is replaced in his mind with an apple tree. He interprets Benjy’s howls of protest and anguish as “the voice that breathed o’er Eden” (Faulkner 81). But instead of replaying and idolizing memories of Caddy when she was still unsoiled, as Benjy does, Quentin’s memories of Caddy are almost solely of her after she has had sex, which he associates with the redolence of honeysuckle. The scent is also linked in his mind with the trees in the woods where she meets her lovers, and with death: “all cedars came to have that vivid dead smell of perfume that Benjy hated so” (Faulkner 176). He ascribes the hatred of the odor to his brother, but he is clearly repulsed himself by honeysuckle. According to Roberts, the Southern literary convention of metaphorically associating white daughters of upper-class families with plants symbolically places them “in the plantation garden, … signifying not only the body of the master’s land but the forbidden body of the master’s daughter” (116). She argues that Quentin’s association of Caddy with the strong scent and unruly vines of honeysuckle in particular is an association of her with “the (ruined) plantation garden” (117). The scent is thus linked in his mind with expulsion from Eden, his idealized image of the past, and is why he is suffocated by “the saddest odor of all” (Faulkner 169). What Quentin finds most appalling about Caddy’s sexuality is that it is the antithesis of the behavior
expected of a decent white woman: “Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dark woods” (Faulkner 92).

Although there is no indication Caddy connects her sexuality to a lost Paradise, she too associates her sexuality with death. Her response to Quentin’s promptings to tell him she hates her lover is passionate: “yes I hate him I would die for him I’ve already died for him I die for him over and over again everytime this goes” (Faulkner 151). Even though Faulkner’s character may not be aware of the use of to die as a euphemism for orgasm, it is almost certain the author was. The association of pleasure with death evokes her feeling of utter abandonment and escape. Caddy knows that sex for pleasure, rather than for procreation sanctioned by marriage, is a mortal sin. Once she becomes pregnant, her association of sex with death transforms and is made bitter because she knows her deeds have effectively made her dead in the eyes of society: “I died last year I told you I had but I didn’t know then what I meant I didn’t know what I was saying” (Faulkner 123). In her despair, her sexual desire becomes monstrous: “There was something terrible in me sometimes at night I could see it grinning at me I could see it through them grinning at me through their faces it’s gone now and I’m sick” (Faulkner 112). Her defiance crumbles as she describes pregnancy as a malady for which the only remedy is to do what is socially acceptable and marry. She submits to familial and societal pressure and punishes herself by blaming her sexuality for her father’s alcoholism and the consequent risk of Benjy being sent to a state asylum: “Father will be dead in a year they say if he doesn’t stop drinking and he wont stop he cant stop since I since last summer and then they’ll send Benjy to Jackson” (Faulkner 124). The withering of Caddy’s sexual desire and her willingness to marry is, to Dawn Trouard, proof that “She is now willing to surrender her entire identity to oblige the social hypocrisy of her mother and perhaps her father” (39). I agree that the family’s welfare is foremost in Caddy’s thoughts, yet her urge to take care of others is also part of her identity, as exhibited by her mothering of Benjy. Her willingness to marry does reveal a diminishment of her defiance, but is also a continuation of her self-appointed role of protector. Trouard balances her view of Mrs. Compson’s social hypocrisy by viewing her motivations in light of sociohistorical context: “she was not atypical: many mothers would have reached for the camphor when faced with a pregnant and unmarried daughter” (39-40). Following that vein, I believe similar consideration can be taken to analyze Caddy’s reaction to her pregnancy: many pregnant, teenage girls in 1910 would not have dared fly in the face of social convention by not marrying, even if they were once brave little girls. It is also important to keep in mind the inherent uncertainties regarding the portrayal of Caddy in the novel; when she describes her sexual desire as horrific
and mocking, Ross and Polk theorize that “It is possible that Caddy is saying what she thinks Quentin wants to hear, or, even more likely, that Quentin is reporting what he wants Caddy to have said” (126).

In the aftermath of the destruction of his ideal images of the past and himself as an authority figure by right of race and gender, Quentin is plagued by uncertainty: “all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical” (Faulkner 170). He is shaken by the instability of existence because he wants to believe words are invested with inherent meaning and divine power to change reality, but his faith in the power and determinacy of language has crumbled. As Barker and Kamps argue, this realization “threatens his very sense of self.” When he hears three boys talk about what they would do with money they do not have, he notices a tendency in others that he has come to recognize in himself: “They all talked at once, their voices insistent and contradictory and impatient, making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words” (Faulkner 117). Indeed, Quentin’s interpretation of the boys’ desires becoming words mirrors his own impulse to use words to shape reality in his recollection of his efforts to convince Caddy they committed incest: “We didn’t do that did we do that ... we did how can you not know it ... and Ill tell you how it was Ill tell Father then itll have to be” (Faulkner 148). Not only does he believe he can use words to change reality, but he believes that the act of telling his father will grant his words the authority to convince Caddy his desires are true, which Polk argues is Quentin’s attempt “to control Caddy linguistically” (“Trying” 155). Richard Godden situates the incest fantasy within the history of Southern culture:

The cult of Southern womanhood raised the standard of the unbreachable hymen precisely because miscegenation breached the color line throughout the prewar South. Plainly, if the iconic figure was to stand the iconclastic [sic] force of the realistic evidence, it needed support – support which white males found in the incest dream, institutionally reinforced by a high incidence of cousinship marriage among the plantocracy. (107)

The destructiveness of the incest fantasy is apparent in Quentin’s feeling of guilt. He believes he has sinned and deserves to be punished merely for having forbidden thoughts. His reaction is not outlandish, considering his wish for the power of the word, and the weight of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount: “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). Quentin longs to be alone with Caddy in hell, isolated from the world, surrounded by a “clean flame” where they will be “more than dead”
(Faulkner 116). He envisions purification achieved through eternal damnation, which would also serve to satisfy his need for everlasting truth and an escape from uncertainty.

How Caddy communicates with Quentin challenges his conception that words are imbued with unequivocal meaning and truth that can change reality, and she thus illustrates the limitations of language. When they talk about her first sexual experience, Caddy asks him in vague terms about his virginity: “youve never done that have you [?]” (Faulkner 151), using inference to discuss what she knows is a sensitive subject for Quentin. When he becomes more distraught, she communicates even more indirectly. Realizing he does not want to accept that her pounding heart belied her previous denial of love, she abandons words altogether when Quentin asks her for the third time if she loves Dalton. Rather than expressing her desire with language, she places his hand on her throat and asks him to say Dalton’s name. Her answer resounds in Quentin’s memory of her physical response: “I felt the first surge of blood there it surged in strong accelerating beats” (Faulkner 163). When Quentin is unable or unwilling to believe she is pregnant and persists in asking her why she must get married, Caddy’s challenge of his conception of language is explicit: “Do you want me to say it do you think that if I say it it wont be” (Faulkner 122). Her demand shows that she “recognizes that pregnancy is beyond language, something that need not be said” (Clarke 26), and that it cannot be undone with words. Unlike her attempts to use language to help Benjy express his desires, Caddy avoids using defining words with Quentin, precisely because she understands the power that words like sex, love, and pregnant have over him. She knows that in his mind these words are inextricably bound with romanticized ideas of the absolute truth of death, honor, and sin. His conversations with Caddy, and his failed attempt to control her body with his words, begin the erosion of his faith in language that is finally destroyed by exchanges with his father.

Quentin’s few memories of the virgin Caddy are integral to understanding his perception of their personalities and relationship. The image of Caddy’s strength and courage as a little girl in the first section is reinforced in the second. However, while Benjy also sees Caddy as a compassionate, maternal caregiver, Quentin is obsessed with her trespasses into male territory. He remembers that when they played as children, “she never was a queen or a fairy she was always a king or a giant or a general” (Faulkner 173). Quentin is haunted by the memory of a picture in a storybook of two faces in a dark place. But Caddy, as a little girl who recognizes the power men are given, imagines being a king and declares, “I’d break that place open and drag them out and I’d whip them good” (Faulkner 173). As Gwin elucidates, “Caddy’s voice erupts as a powerful challenge to despair” (49). Quentin is threatened by his sister’s tenacious challenge because she takes on the role of protector he believes is his by right. Luce
Irigaray “argues that Western philosophical discourse is incapable of representing femininity/woman other than as the negative of its own reflection” (Moi 132). I believe her assertion applies well to the character of Quentin. As Roberts points out, he repeatedly sees Caddy in mirrors “as if he, Quentin, sees her as his reflection” (118). He obsessively polishes his image of Caddy’s ‘masculinity’ to use her as a mirror and stare despondently at what he perceives as lacking in himself.

The combination of Quentin’s insecurity and the sexual tension that characterizes their relationship is the catalyst of their conflicts, which are played out in sexualized power struggles. In response to Quentin’s taunts about sexually experimenting with Natalie, Caddy hides her jealousy with scornful indifference. He uses physical force to assert his authority and mask his pain: “I’ll make you give a damn” (Faulkner 137). They struggle in a sexually charged scene, fighting in the mud, which he “smeared on her wet hard turning body” (Faulkner 137). When Quentin assumes that Caddy submissively allowed a boy to kiss her, she disabuses him of the notion: “I didn’t let him I made him” (Faulkner 133). Quentin slaps her and pushes her face down into the ground, claiming he did so “for letting it be some darn town squirt” (Faulkner 134). But his reaction is a jealous rage in response to her taunts of sexual assertiveness. Although Caddy does not admit defeat, her retort reveals her mutual feelings of jealousy, despite her claims to the contrary: “I didn’t kiss a dirty girl like Natalie anyway” (Faulkner 134).

After Caddy has sex, Quentin feels emasculated by his own virginity and is no longer able to muster the aggression to use physical force to control her. His investment in the belief that virginity is valued in women but ridiculed in men diminishes his perceived self-worth and masculinity: “if it was that simple to do it wouldn’t be anything and if it wasn’t anything what was I” (Faulkner 147). Equating her loss of purity with a reason to die, he becomes distraught with tears and asks Caddy if she remembers the day she muddied her drawers, then proposes he kill her and then himself. Ross and Polk observe that “his entire identity has depended on defending Caddy’s virginity—or more precisely, the idea of virginity” (123). Even though the murder/suicide pact is Quentin’s idea, Caddy is the more assertive of the two. She agrees, but she is not going to simply let Quentin act: she is going to make him. He asks her to close her eyes, but she instructs him instead: “no like this youll have to push it harder” (Faulkner 152). Instead of replying to his second query about her muddy drawers, she tells him not to cry and continues to urge him to push in the knife, in a scene of unremitting sexual tension. He realizes he does not elicit the same passion in her as her lover does when he hears “her heart going firm and slow now not hammering” (Faulkner 152). Quentin’s inability to act is yet an-
other failure: “Dropping his knife is a perfect objective correlative for Quentin’s sexual and emotional impotence” (Ross and Polk 131).

The traditionally masculine qualities that Caddy has exhibited since she was a child and Quentin’s failure to act as her protector exacerbate his feelings of inadequacy and femininity. After he finds out she is no longer a virgin, he confronts Dalton, but his threat sounds ineffectual in his own ears: “I heard myself saying Ill give you until sundown to leave town” (Faulkner 159). He hits Dalton with an open hand and is overpowered, and reflects that he “had just passed out like a girl” (Faulkner 162). As Barker and Kamps argue, “In a society in which chivalry, honor, and aristocratic sensibility are but shadowy things of the past, Quentin finds himself pathetically struggling to uphold the role of the Southern gentleman.” When he confronts Herbert for being a dishonorable cheat, the judgment passed on him as a “half-baked Galahad of a brother” goes straight to the heart of his insecurity over his inability to live up to his chivalrous ideal (Faulkner 110). It is a further blow to Quentin’s ego that what he espouses as an act of protection is rejected by Caddy: “You’re meddling in my business again didn’t you get enough of that last summer” (Faulkner 111). She further dismisses his qualms of honor in her pragmatic view of Herbert’s dubious past: “Well what about it I’m not going to play cards with [him]” (Faulkner 123). Although Caddy rejects Quentin’s efforts to intervene on her behalf, she urges him to take over the role of Benjy and Father’s protector when she realizes she is pregnant. She lays the responsibility on Quentin for their father’s wellbeing by urging him of the necessity of continuing his studies at Harvard: “if you dont finish he’ll have nothing” (Faulkner 124). Caddy thus contributes to his confusion by alternately discouraging and fostering his impulse to take on a traditional role.

Quentin would like to be a strong, assertive, and heroic figure, and he loathes, envies, and romanticizes men whom he perceives as having such qualities. He notices men’s bodies and remarks upon their looks with envy and desire, such as a fellow Harvard student’s “curly yellow hair and his violet eyes and his eyelashes” (Faulkner 91). The attraction he feels for Caddy’s lover Dalton is apparent in how he perceives a transformation in the appearance of the other man’s shirts: “I thought all the time they were khaki, army issue khaki, until I saw they were of heavy Chinese silk or finest flannel because they made his face so brown his eyes so blue” (Faulkner 92). He is not only jealous of the attention Caddy gives Dalton, but also resents Dalton’s lack of interest in him, blaming his own failure to become a strong man for his inability to capture the male gaze: “all of a sudden I knew he wasn’t thinking of me at all as a potential source of harm but was thinking of her when he looked at me was looking at me through her like through a piece of colored glass” (Faulkner 175). As Ross and Polk a-
gue, Quentin’s “vision of [Dalton] Ames is homoerotically implicated with his own sexual uncertainties” (146). His incestuous desire for Caddy is thus an expression of his confusion over his own sexuality. He is attracted to her because she exhibits traditionally masculine traits that he envies and is aroused by. Although incest is a taboo, in Quentin’s mind it is more acceptable to desire any woman, even his own sister, rather than another man. His mixture of yearning, fascination, and abhorrence for Caddy is an expression of corresponding conflicted feelings about his own masculinity, femininity, and sexual desire. The detrimental effect on Quentin’s psyche of his failure to become the ideal heroic male in relation to Caddy exposes the harm these traditional roles inflict on both women and men, since they “are equally victims of their society’s patriarchal valuation of male sexual power …” (Ross and Polk 96).

In some ways Jason’s narrative, “April Sixth, 1928,” seems radically different from Quentin and Benjy’s, but he “nonetheless loses himself in memories he can control only slightly better than his brothers can control theirs” (Ross and Polk 158). His notorious opening line, “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say” (Faulkner 180), sets the tone of his grindingly misogynistic monologue, which Polk succinctly likens to “Benjy’s howling rage made verbal” (“Trying” 155). He is not haunted by thoughts of Caddy’s sexuality, but exacts his revenge on her economically and by cruelly mistreating her daughter, also named Quentin, with his frenzied attempts to control her sexuality, “… perpetuating the central place of female sexuality in this drama of Compson downfall” (Roberts 115). Roberts writes that “The body of the Belle was inscribed with the integrity and glamour of the South itself. Her sexual purity translated her into the emblem of racial purity” (102). Jason is threatened by Quentin’s sexuality because she threatens to ruin her symbolic status, and thus stain the family honor as Caddy did. He condemns her for behaving “like a nigger wench,” illustrating once again the interwoven tensions of race and sexuality in the South (Faulkner 189).

Jason is thoroughly invested in what Roberts argues are the “defining binaries of the South: white over black, virgin over whore” (70). His narrative is the only view given of Caddy as a mother, which is significant considering Jason’s conflicted feelings about his own mother, whom he ridicules even as he vows to protect her position on the pedestal on which he has placed her. Jason resents the women in his life, except perhaps his girlfriend, Lorraine, whom he extols for being “a good honest whore” (Faulkner 233): “I’d like to see the good, church-going woman that’s half as square as Lorraine, whore or no whore” (Faulkner 246). He then makes an associative leap to conversations with his mother about what would happen if he got married. As Polk explains, what is revealed in “the contorted connections he makes, willy-nilly, between his bachelorhood, Lorraine, and his mother: again and again Lorraine and
Mother collide, in the deepest, least conscious, part of Jason’s mind” (“Trying” 165). On the surface, Jason differentiates good women from whores, or at least he believes he does. In explaining Julia Kristeva’s theory of the marginality of women, Moi writes that “It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God” (166). I believe this theory is applicable to explain Jason’s view of women; once they are no longer virgins, they are whores.

In Jason’s monologue, women are a medium of exchange. Caddy fades into the background and does not play as large a role in this section because, as Trouard explains, “Her illicit pregnancy has canceled her value in the system of exchange; as ‘a fallen woman’ she can no longer operate as valuable currency in the patriarchal economy” (44). As a commodity, Caddy has no remaining value other than as a sexual receptacle. When she offers Jason a thousand dollars to convince their mother to return Quentin to her, he assumes she will earn the money on her back: “‘And I know how you’ll get it,’ I says. ‘You’ll get it the same way you got her [Quentin]. And when she gets big enough—’” (Faulkner 209). In his mind, Caddy, a divorcée and mother of a bastard daughter, must be prostituting herself and will inevitably turn her daughter into a prostitute as well. As Gwin explains, “what he cannot forgive her for spending is her past value as a virgin, that which was negotiated to Herbert Head but was found worthless” (57). In Jason’s section, the character of Caddy exposes the prevailing social construct of woman as either Madonna or whore, but whether revered or castigated, she is a subject to be controlled physically and economically. When Caddy is forced to accept that she cannot possibly take her daughter away, she pleads with him to use the money to provide Quentin with “things like other girls,” to which he responds: “As long as you behave and do like I tell you” (Faulkner 210). The only way Jason can feel like a man is by controlling women. He is unable to achieve a feeling of mastery over his mother and sister so he punishes them for his own sense of failure by sneaking, lying, stealing from his sister and his niece, and deceiving his mother. As Trouard argues, “Jason perpetually negotiates and calculates the losses he has suffered at the hands of the world in general, but especially women, and most specifically Caddy” (46).

Jason focuses on memories of Caddy at times when he is able to wring money from her (that he believes she owes him), subjugate her, or make her desperate. He is content only when he believes himself victorious, and frustrated by Caddy’s circumvention of his power, using whatever ways and means are available to her, such as going behind his back to Dilsey
in order to see her daughter, when direct appeal to Jason fails. Ever the consummate tattletale, Jason tells his mother. He threatens Caddy with dreadful consequences if she tries again, telling her that “Mother was going to fire Dilsey and send Ben to Jackson and take Quentin and go away” (Faulkner 208). He uses the power of his mother’s authority to mask what he would like to do to the people Caddy loves most. Imagining he can feel her reaction, he likens it to times she was powerless as a child: “When we were little when she’d get mad and couldn’t do anything about it her upper lip would begin to jump. Everytime it jumped it would leave a little more of her teeth showing” (Faulkner 208). He seems to take satisfaction in imagining Caddy as a cornered animal. But Jason’s description of the scene shows that the association with helplessness is his own creation: “There wasn’t any street light close and I couldn’t see her face much” (Faulkner 208). Caddy’s only response is to ask him how much money he wants.

Trouard argues that Caddy is inexplicably changed in Jason’s monologue, “where she is powerless, at his mercy, futilely pleading with him to be kind to her child. The defiant little girl … bears little resemblance to this woman” (25). However, I believe Caddy’s desperation illustrates a painfully learned understanding of her position as a subject, trapped in the ideals of Southern womanhood. She is no longer a child; as a woman, she knows she can never become a king or a general and she, like other slaves by reason of race or gender, can only rebel in secret. Caddy’s awareness of the futility of negotiating with Jason is evident, after she pleads with him to be kind to Quentin: “But you wont. You never had a drop of warm blood in you” (Faulkner 209). But she represses her anger to try and do what she can to help her daughter, even if it means prostrating herself before her brother. Her restraint is especially poignant in the narrative of a man consumed by his own rage. As Gwin points out, even though Caddy pleads, she speaks “an ideological stance which questions and subverts Jason’s economy and the cultural text it supports” (57). Since Jason focuses on times he is able to conquer Caddy, her defiance may seem diminished, but it still simmers beneath the surface.

Even this Caddy does not always ‘behave,’ which is alluded to when Jason gets a letter from her and remarks, “I just felt that it was about time she was up to some of her tricks again” (Faulkner 201). In the letter, she writes, “You are opening my letters to her [Quentin]. I know that as well as if I were looking at you” (Faulkner 190). From a distance, she is able to reclaim some of her former boldness. She wants to know that her daughter is well and receiving everything she sends, and threatens Jason: “Let me know at once or I’ll come there and see for myself” (Faulkner 190). However, even though she uses a tone to take up arms with Jason, who engages in what Polk calls “verbal combat” (“Trying” 156), he is not deterred by
her threats. He opens Caddy’s letter to Quentin and forces his niece to endorse the enclosed money order, and then gives her ten dollars without letting her see that her mother sent her fifty. I suggest that Caddy’s fruitless attempts to subvert Jason’s power are a stark illustration and tacit indictment of the prevailing social order.

The final section, “April Eighth, 1928,” takes place on Easter Sunday. When the dawn breaks on Easter morning, Caddy and her daughter have achieved their own symbolic resurrection. Jason realizes that Quentin has run away with the money he kept hidden in a lockbox in his bedroom. He is driven to distraction by the theft of ‘his’ money. While Dilsey is attending Easter services with Benjy, Jason futilely pursues his niece. When he realizes his efforts are in vain, he imagines being in bed with Lorraine, hoping to find aid and comfort from a true, fully subjugated whore: “only he was just lying beside her, pleading with her to help him” (Faulkner 307). His inability to recover the money, and the power it represents, leaves him impotent. He feels emasculated and especially enraged that he was robbed “by the very symbol of the lost job itself, and worst of all, by a bitch of a girl” (Faulkner 307). Quentin’s escape frees her and her mother from Jason’s domination. As Trouard argues, “In disappearing from the Compson world into futures unimaginable, Caddy and her daughter accomplish the escapes crucial to resistance” (53). They are now both characterized solely by their absence. In the final section, Caddy is recalled to the reader’s memory through objects and places associated with her, but her name is only mentioned when Luster, Dilsey’s grandson, whispers it to taunt Benjy.

When we first encounter Caddy, in Benjy’s narrative, she is a strong, brave, and independent little girl. She dares to climb the tree, which is a demonstration of her courage and hunger for knowledge. When her actions as a girl are seen in light of the Eve myth, a subtle criticism is revealed of the dichotomization of women as either saints or sinners, for Caddy is neither the reason for the family’s downfall, nor the agent of their salvation. Her compassionate and nurturing side is evident in her mothering of Benjy, and her maternal use of language with him. The emphasis placed on her chastity reveals the need in Southern culture to elevate white women as symbols of enduring morality in the face of defeat. His yearning for a virgin mother is an expression of a patriarchal, Christian frame of reference, resulting in the self-deprivation of the one person who keeps him emotionally connected to the world, which I believe signifies a subtle criticism of the icon of the virgin mother. It is also possibly an illustration of how deeply the ideal of female chastity was embedded in Southern culture, as it could be reproduced even in a man bereft of language and cognitive skills. Caddy’s drive to attain selfhood and pursuit of dangerous, seductive freedom are even stronger than her deep
love for Benjy, accentuating the unattainability of the ideal and revealing its use as an instrument in maintaining social and gender constructs.

Just as it is with Benjy, Caddy’s first sexual experience is the metaphorical death of her bond with Quentin. Caddy and Quentin both associate her sexuality with death. For Quentin, Caddy’s sin is equated with his notions of the South as a wrecked Eden; for her, it is an irresistible passion that leads to social death and banishment. His nostalgic look back to a time when white masters had ultimate control and authority manifests itself in his desire to be able to use his words to shape reality and control his sister’s body. The schism in how they conceptualize existence is exacerbated by how they communicate with each other. Caddy recognizes Quentin’s need for words to transcend the transience of existence and be imbued with inherent meaning; she challenges his concept of words and demonstrates the limitations of language. Quentin obsessively polishes his image of Caddy’s masculinity to use her as a mirror and stare despondently at what he perceives as lacking in himself. His mixture of yearning, fascination, and abhorrence for Caddy is an expression of his distorted sense of his own masculinity, femininity, and sexual desire. The portrayal of Caddy’s assertiveness and Quentin’s effeminacy scrutinizes the assumption of biologically determined gender roles. The detrimental effect on Quentin’s psyche of his failure to become the heroic Southern gentleman and defender of female virtue in relation to Caddy exposes the harm these traditional roles inflict on both women and men.

Jason’s misogynistic narrative is the only view of Caddy as a mother. His investment in the Southern, binary categorization of race and gender distorts his view of women. On some level, he considers all women whores, even his own mother, with the only distinction being whether they are honest or dishonest. His view of women comments on the unjustness of castigating all women who are not virgins as whores. When Caddy gets pregnant outside of marriage and loses her value as a medium of exchange, she fades into the background. Caddy’s assertiveness is subdued in Jason’s narrative when she pleads with him for her daughter’s sake, but it is also a poignant argument against the oppression of women. Her defiance as a little girl is transformed by a painfully learned understanding of her position as a subject, trapped in the ideals of Southern womanhood. When she does engage with Jason in verbal combat, in her position as a commodity of little value, it is a battle she cannot win, which attacks the practice of treating women like things to be bought and sold. Jason’s treatment of Caddy illustrates the perceived worthlessness of women who have stepped outside the bounds of that which is sanctified by Christian patriarchal values, especially in their Southern manifestation.
Despite Caddy’s lack of narrative voice, she plays an integral role in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*: she disrupts the brothers’ narratives and challenges the underlying Southern social and gender constructs that imbue them, thus making a feminist statement all the more powerful for its subtlety. By conjuring her presence through her absence, her brothers reveal the depth and destructiveness of the social imperatives that underlie their attempts to control her. As each brother uses Caddy as a mirror to reflect his own obsessions, she in turn reflects back the causes of their undoing. In each of their narratives, Caddy is a dynamic character whose words, body, and actions expose prevailing social and gender power struggles. She is a tragic character since, as a woman in a patriarchal society, she is not given her own voice or an identity separate from those her brothers give her, which sheds light on the invisibility of women in patriarchal societies. And yet, despite the distortions, conflicts, and gaps in her brothers’ memories and perceptions, the woman struggling to break free of the bonds of patriarchy can still be seen in Caddy Compson, as through a piece of colored glass.
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