The Compson Boys in *The Sound and the Fury:*
A Critique on Faulkner’s Tale of the “Beautiful and Tragic” Girl

*The Sound and the Fury* is considered by many to be one of William Faulkner’s most celebrated and brilliant works; however, in interviews, Faulkner spoke of this novel as being incomplete and a failure. Faulkner’s original goal in writing *The Sound and the Fury* was to tell a story about a tragic little girl; he wanted to create the girl whom he never had in his own life, the character of Caddy Compson. Yet, despite Faulkner’s four attempts at describing and telling Caddy Compson’s story, he still felt her story was lacking. He wrote an appendix to the novel fifteen years after its publication as a last attempt, but even in the appendix he did not feel he was successful. This is because the story is told through the eyes of Caddy’s brothers, and never by Caddy. In this way, the story is more about Caddy’s brothers, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, than it is about Caddy herself. For each brother, Caddy represents a different part of who they are: a mother, a symbol of honor, or a scapegoat. And through their interactions with Caddy, the reader is divulged information about each brother as he sees himself in terms of Caddy’s actions. William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury* fails to do what he claimed to set out to do in the novel because, rather than using various thoughts from the brothers to tell the story of Caddy Compson, in the novel Caddy is simply used as an object on which the brothers can reflect their own emotions and insecurities, thus making the novel about Benjy, Quentin, and Jason.
Faulkner had full intentions of writing *The Sound and the Fury* about a girl, Caddy Compson, as stated in “An Introduction for *The Sound and the Fury*” from 1933 in which he wrote: “So I, who never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl” (228). Rather than telling the story from Caddy’s point of view, Faulkner wanted to tell her story from the viewpoint of an outsider because the girl was “too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on,…it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else’s eyes” (“Class Conferences at the University of Virginia” 235). In doing so, her character could remain innocent while those around her told the story. When someone tells a story it is often one dimensional and flat because it only come from their point of view, but if the story is told from many different sources new dimensions and layers are added. Faulkner wanted to create a jigsaw puzzle effect in which the reader was required to find each puzzle piece and use the information to put together the whole picture.

However, he was too concerned with *how* he would tell Caddy’s story than with what story he was trying to tell, and so the character of Caddy Compson became more of a symbolic object. Thought plays an important role throughout the novel in revealing aspects about each character, but Caddy has no thoughts of her own in the novel and so her character becomes diminished. We never learn Caddy’s reasons behind her actions or her feelings about the outcomes of her actions. The reader only learns of Caddy through the viewpoints of others, and so Caddy’s mind and conscience are never revealed. Thus, Caddy became a symbolic object through which her brothers could reflect their insecurities and emotions, as laid out in the first three sections of the novel.

In the first section, told by Benjy, Caddy’s younger, mentally handicapped brother, Caddy is used by Benjy as an object for affection and love. Benjy’s low mental state causes him
to only relate to people in terms of concrete sensations, and those sense memories were most often connected to the comfort Caddy provided him. Benjy is fixated on Caddy’s scent, “Caddy smelled like trees” (Faulkner 29) is repeated by him over and over, and Caddy’s distinct tree-like scent is what provided him comfort throughout his childhood. It is through Benjy’s reactions to Caddy’s actions that we better understand him as a person, rather than a thing. Benjy reacts strongly whenever Caddy’s scent changes. At Caddy’s wedding, Caddy tries to hug Benjy but Benjy “went away” (Faulkner 26) because of the perfume Caddy was wearing. Earlier in their lives, when Caddy loses her virginity Benjy can innately sense that something is different about her and follows her throughout the house:

She stopped again, against the wall, looking at me and I cried and she went on and I came on, crying, and she shrank against the wall looking at me. She opened the door to her room, but I pulled at her dress and we went to the bathroom and she stood against the door, looking at me. Then she put her arm across her face and I pushed at her, crying.

(Faulkner 44)

While her parents simply let Caddy be, Benjy is keen in his senses and realizes the stress and shame Caddy is feeling. Through these events we only learn the actions of Caddy, and yet we learn so much about the feelings of Benjy. Despite his simple nature, the reader discovers what a sensitive and detail-oriented person Benjy is. Benjy is revealed as a incredibly emotional human being, even though he does not understand the situation, yet all we learn about Caddy is how compassionate she is towards her brother. This is only one, small piece of the puzzle to her character.

Faulkner believed that by telling Caddy’s story through “the eyes of the idiot child…it would be more effective as told by someone capable of only knowing what happened, but not why” because it could leave the reader to interpret the why (“Interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel” 233). However, this first section of The Sound and the Fury is not effective in telling
Caddy’s story, but instead in revealing the inner-workings of Benjy’s mind. Faulkner planned on using Benjy’s character as an unbiased lenses through which the reader could interpret Caddy, but Benjy’s section is so disorganized and challenging that any message about Caddy can be clearly misinterpreted by the reader and so, in this regard, we begin to see Faulkner’s failure to reveal the girl’s story. Yet, the section delves deep into the mind of Benjy and it is evident that, although his reasoning may be lacking, his emotions and feelings are clear. When Benjy “attacks” a young girl it seems that he does not know what is happening and that he “was trying to say,…trying to say” (Faulkner 34) to provide some sort of explanation or warning for his actions. He has little control over what happens as he “tried to get it off [his] face, but the bright shapes were going again” (Faulkner 34), but he is overwhelmed with emotions and is so distraught that he can barely even breathe, “But when I breathed in, I couldn’t breathe out again to cry, and I tried to keep from falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes” (Faulkner 34). Benjy’s powerful emotions are what often cause people to become frustrated with him, but Caddy’s patience and caring nature provide him with much needed stability in his life.

For Benjy, Caddy is a object of affection; someone who can understand his intense emotions without judgment. She holds no purpose as a human because as she grows and changes, as all healthy humans do, he loses his connection to her. Benjy does not see Caddy in terms of age or development, instead he simply relies on memories, mere snapshots, for reassurance and so the reader cannot see Caddy as she grows and develops either. Benjy cannot deal with change, even the simple diversion in the carriage in the last section derails him completely and sends him into a fit (Faulkner 199). He is fixated on pattern and preserving his image of Caddy; he is so concerned with maintaining “the pattern rather than any single one of
its parts, there is little that he can lose. Even Caddy has no existence for him except as she forms part of that pattern” (Vickery 36). In this way, Caddy’s story cannot unfold itself because in Benjy’s mind she is simply a means of maintaining order in his world. Thus, her story is lost in the sea of memory and repetition brought on by his need for stability. Benjy’s interactions with people and things spark memories of his past in which snippets of Caddy as revealed. Yet, these snippets are remembered in a disorganized and unmanageable fashion used by Benjy for comfort. These puzzle pieces of Caddy’s persona are only the edge pieces; the whole inside of the puzzle is left empty. Nothing deeper about her emotions or actions is revealed and although Caddy holds a great deal of significance in the Benjy section, it is only in the way Benjy uses his memories of her to stabilize his world.

In her older brother Quentin’s mind, Caddy is a symbol of purity and Compson family honor. “Caddy, who seems almost a symbol of the blind forces of nature, is an unstable guardian for that ‘concept of Compson honor precariously and…only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead’” (Vickery 37). Despite Caddy’s promiscuous actions, Quentin cannot view her as anything less than a goddess-like figure and so the reader, once again, receives a distorted puzzle piece of the persona of Caddy Compson. From the influence of his father, he views women as objects to protect: “Father and I protect women from one another from themselves our women” (Faulkner 61-2). In Quentin’s eyes, all women, including Caddy, “don’t acquire knowledge of people”, “are just born with a practical fertility of suspicion”, and “have an affinity for evil for supplying whatever the evil lacks in itself for drawing it about them instinctively” (Faulkner 62). From his view, women are things to protect that are unable to have knowledge about the world around them or keep out of trouble on their own. Since Quentin believes this to be the case, Caddy is therefore at no fault for her promiscuity, because as a
woman she naturally attracts evil, and Quentin believes it to be his fault for failing to protect her from temptation.

In accordance with maintaining family honor, Quentin takes it upon himself to carry the blame for Caddy’s unplanned pregnancy: “I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames” (Faulkner 51). Although in many people’s eyes the sin of incest is much greater than the individual sin of sex outside of marriage, to Quentin he would rather go down with Caddy than allow her to fall on her own. He is so obsessed with maintaining her purity that he would rather be damned with her and take on the stigma of sleeping with his sister than let her go through the persecution alone. Yet, his plan never worked and his father did not believe his claim of incest nor did Caddy allow it to be thought of as real. Quentin so badly wishes to cover up Caddy’s sins and end their suffering; he sees Caddy’s mistakes in life as a reflection of his own failure as a Compson man. Quentin tries to justify Caddy’s actions by repeatedly asking her if she loved Dalton Ames, the boy she slept with, but Caddy says no and so Quentin’s justification falls short (Faulkner 95). Because there was no love involved in the sex, Quentin wants to believe that Dalton Ames took advantage of her: “…he made you do it let him he was stronger than you and he tomorrow Ill kill him I swear…” (Faulkner 95). But Caddy denies this and so Quentin is left to ponder the fact that his beloved sister slept with a man she did not love outside of wedlock. His sole job as the eldest Compson was to maintain a good family name and Caddy’s fatal mistake occurred, in his mind, solely because he failed at this and allowed “this curse” to infect the family (Faulkner 66).

Caddy’s unplanned pregnancy is what fuels Quentin’s obsession with family honor. In order to end the honor-tainting situation, Quentin even suggests a murder/suicide pact. He believes that by killing Caddy and then himself he can end all of the pain and suffering that
Caddy has gone through and the inevitable suffering the Compson family will go through once
the news of her pregnancy is spread:

I held the point of the knife at her throat
it wont take but a second just a second then I can do mine I can do mine then
all right can you do yours by yourself
yes the blades long enough Benjys in bed by now

Faulkner, 96

This jumbled and jumpy speech between Quentin and Caddy portrays the confusion and fear
they both had about the situation. Throughout the whole conversation, as recited from Quentin’s
memory, it is unclear who is speaking when or even who is more serious about committing
suicide. Memories are often shrouded in self-perception, and so even Quentin’s memories cannot
be taken at face value. His actions and speech as he remembers them may not be what actually
occurred during this event, and so the puzzle becomes even more difficult to piece together. At
times, Quentin seems to be afraid of actually acting on this urge, Caddy tells him “no like this
youll have to push it harder” (Faulkner 96), and eventually he drops the knife and the spell cast
by the closeness of death is broken. And still Quentin needs to prove his strength to Caddy; he
needs to assure his family’s honor and goes to fight Dalton Ames.

Unlike Benjy, Quentin’s interest in Caddy lies not in the comfort her memory provides
him, but rather in the discomfort of her betrayal of the Compson honor. It is only through
Quentin’s own death that Caddy’s stigma will be removed from the Compson family, because
her sin only lives on in his memory. Living at Harvard, Quentin appears to have little contact
with his family, and so he does not know how it is effecting the rest of his family or how they
feel about the situation. But, to Quentin, accepting his sister’s sin is impossible because it
reinforces within him his inability to live up to his family name. “In a sense, the whole history of
Caddy lies in his memory and when he ceases to be, so does her betrayal of Compson honor”
(Vickery 40). Through suicide, Quentin is clearing himself and his family of the stigma Caddy placed upon them, and so Caddy becomes merely an object of sin. To Quentin, she is a memory full of lost chances for retribution.

Jason is the only brother who actually has contact with Caddy in present time and place. However, most of his interactions deal with Caddy’s illegitimate daughter, Miss Quentin. Jason uses Caddy and Miss Quentin, his replacement for Caddy after she has left, as scapegoats on which to blame for his meaningless and sorry life. In this way, Jason does not have to hold any responsibility for his past actions and the outcome of his life. Caddy becomes represented as the bane of Jason’s existence; her affair ruined her engagement to Herbert, which in turn caused Jason to lose his promised job as a banker. This piece of Caddy is quite contradictory to those beliefs of her other brothers and so a new section of the puzzle is revealed, and yet the pieces do not seem to fit together. The fact that it was Caddy does not seem to matter, because Jason would have felt the same if it had been any other family members mistake; “in this reasoning the human beings involved are quite irrelevant” (Vickery 43). To Jason, the actions of Caddy only mean something to him because of the effect they had on him; if Caddy’s actions had not directly affected his life then Jason would not have bothered thinking about it. Jason only cares about himself and his own personal gain. His reactions to Caddy and Miss Quentin allow the reader to interpret him as a calculating person focused on the facts of the matter; no other aspects such as truth or justice seem to matter. The facts from his point of view are so clear to him that he cannot see any others. Therefore, as the reader we must also read Jason’s section on the side of caution because, although he tells it as it is, he is still telling it from his angry and frustrated point of view.
Jason’s section of the novel begins with the statement, “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say” (Faulkner, 113), and, to Jason, this is what Caddy and Miss Quentin are. They are not human beings nor women, but are representations of this word “bitch”. Jason detests Caddy because she was everything a woman should not be, in his eyes: she flirted with men, she accidentally got pregnant, and then she tried to marry a man who deserted her when he found out about her pregnancy. Miss Quentin is the outcome of the unplanned pregnancy and so by default she is labeled a “bitch”. Jason believes that women “ought to be down there in that kitchen right now, instead of up there in her room, gobbing paint on her face…” and both Caddy and Miss Quentin were the ones “gobbing paint on her face” (Faulkner 113). Since Caddy and Miss Quentin are “bitches” in the mind of Jason, they are not actually told as real people in his section; they are merely Jason’s representation of a “bitch”.

Jason operates in a logical fashion; Caddy’s actions are those of what a “bitch” might do and so she is a bitch. Similarly, he uses reasoning as the means by which he blames Caddy for his failed life, “since it was because of Caddy that he was deprived not only of his inheritance but of his promised job, his recompense must come from Caddy” (Vickery 31). Jason is constantly finding ways to take Caddy’s money from Miss Quentin. He is so desperate to claim that money that he chases Miss Quentin all over the place to try and get it back. However, his logic is derailed when the sheriff questions his motives in the fourth section of the novel asking him what he was doing with three thousand dollars and what he was going to do to Miss Quentin if he caught her (Faulkner 189). And thus his all-consuming obsession with Caddy and the compensation he deserves is actually flawed. Through this, the reader can determine how the idealism of the “rational” man, as represented through Jason, may not always be right because logic can mask the other factors involved in a situation. So, in the case of Jason Compson, Caddy
is reflected as “irrational”, and this is what drives Jason to become consumed with fact and order. However, we never learn of Caddy’s emotions or opinions about the situation since Jason has attempted, at all costs, to cut her out of his life. To Jason, Caddy is simply the catalyst for his downward spiral.

Fifteen years after the original publication of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner published the Appendix in which he attempted one last time to clarify the story of Caddy Compson. However, even in the appendix there are pieces that show Caddy’s insignificance as a character. In the appendix, Quentin’s section begins, “Who loved not his sister’s body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead…” (Faulkner 207). Even Faulkner himself did not write Caddy as a person; she was and still is a symbol of the family honor who destroyed this honor through her promiscuity. In Jason’s section of the appendix, Caddy is not even mentioned, only that “he was somehow using his infant niece’s illegitimacy to blackmail his mother” (Faulkner 212).

Perhaps the most poignant of all is stated in Benjy’s section of the appendix in which it is written that he loved three things: the pasture, Caddy, and firelight. Yet, he “lost none because he could not remember his sister but only the loss of her” (Faulkner 213). If Benjamin only remembered the loss of Caddy, then Caddy’s full story was never told by him, only the story of her disappearance. In this case, the reader cannot even begin to piece together any part of Caddy’s jigsaw puzzle because Benjy does not even tell her story. He only tells what is most important to him: Caddy’s abandonment.

The appendix also adds some insight into Caddy’s life after leaving her family. She ends up in Nazi occupied France, but the only information anyone in Yoknapatawpha county has of
When writing *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner set out to tell the story of that “beautiful and tragic little girl” (228), Caddy Compson. He attempted to tell her story through four different points of view as well as the appendix and still considered the novel a failure. This is because the novel did fail to tell Caddy’s story and what the reader does learn is done so through a biased and untrustworthy lens. Instead, the novel tells the reader about the Compson boys, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. Each of these characters uses Caddy as an object on which they can display their emotions and insecurities within and about themselves. For Benjy, Caddy represents the loving mother he never had, for Quentin, she is a symbol of family honor and her sin is a representation of the loss of that, and for Jason, she is used as a scapegoat on which he can blame the failures in his life. The true story of Caddy can never be known because, as an object, she never gets to tell it herself; any bits and pieces the reader gets come from someone else’s point of view. Without Caddy’s own thoughts and opinions, the reader can never know anything other than her surface
qualities, which, depending on whose telling the story, often contradict one another. The jigsaw puzzle can never be completed because there are huge gaps missing and pieces that do not fit together. Faulkner never wrote the story of his “doomed little girl” (231), but rather the story of her doomed brothers and how they used their sister to find closure for themselves.
Works Cited


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