

The roles of southern women in a changing society



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In the postwar South, the relationships between men and women were beginning to shift. Gwendolyn Chabrier writes, " While the prewar South was traditionally a patriarchy, at the time of the war and particularly afterwards, that paternal system was undermined" (Chabrier, 66). But although ideas of gender were changing, the transition from traditional ways of thinking to altogether different viewpoints is not an easy one. In the Compson family, we are presented with two greatly contrasting images of women. Caroline is the traditional southern woman)submissive, domestic, dependant on men. Caddy, however, has transcended boundaries set for women in the past, by disregarding the importance of maintaining the innocent virgin image that a woman must uphold until marriage. However, neither woman is able to reconcile their way of life with a changing society. Caroline's attempts to recreate the past fail, and Caddy is banished from her family because of her refusal to conform to the family's image of a woman. In a time where traditional Southern thought is losing its importance, yet before a set of ideas emerge to serve as a replacement, women are torn between the traditional mores of the past, and the emerging, still uncertain ideas of modern times. Faulkner portrays a time where women are faced with the dilemma of defining their places in the midst of changing times, while still encountering lingering traditional ideas and standards of how a woman should live. Chabrier writes, " The Old South is dead, or at least dying, but the New South has barely begun to breathe, and Faulkner's families are caught between those two worlds just as Faulkner himself was caught" (Chabrier, 2). Caroline represents one extreme)a woman who is obsessed with her image as a proper Southern " lady" and upholding the ways of the past. Several times Caroline refers to the importance of being a lady. " I was

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taught that there is no halfway ground that a woman is either a lady or not," she notes (Faulkner, 103). But exactly what is a "lady?" One's family background is certainly a factor. Caroline is both proud of being a Bascomb, yet resentful that she was of a lower social class than her husband. "I was unfortunate I was only a Bascomb," she remarks (Faulkner, 103). However, despite her ambivalent feelings, Caroline sees her heritage as an important part of her identity. It is because of this mindset that Caroline does not want Caddy's daughter, Quentin, to know about her mother. It is as if by cutting off Caddy, whom Caroline sees as the source of trouble, Quentin has a better chance of becoming a proper Southern lady. "It'll be hard enough as it is, with the heritage she already has," Caroline comments (Faulkner, 198). Though her plan ultimately fails, Caroline's actions reveal the importance she places in family heritage. Caroline's characteristics fit the image of the pre-Civil War Southern lady, as she is submissive to male authority, fragile, and virtually helpless. Chabrier writes, "[Faulkner's] fictional families, like his own and other Southern families, were the offspring of a patriarchal society in which the woman was relegated to a ceremonial pedestal" (Chabrier, x). Caroline demonstrates her lack of authority by failing to provide any sort of motherly role to her children, and later loses control of Quentin, not even having the power to make her attend school. Caroline is like an ornament without an actual, practical use. Always sick, she needs Dilsey to assist her with even the simplest tasks, such as refilling her hot water bottle, or picking up the Bible where it had fallen on the floor. Caroline orders Dilsey to put the Bible within reach, complaining, "That's where you put it before. Do you want me to have to get out of bed to pick it up?" (Faulkner, 300). She is completely submissive to her husband, and later to Jason, never

contradicting them or able to make any decisions of her own. The sickly Caroline displays her weakness by crying whenever Jason disagrees with her, always yielding to his final decision in a wave of tears and self-pity. She urges Dilsey to adopt the same attitude with Jason, rebuking her for not immediately following Jason's commands. She says, He's head of the house now. It's his right to require us to respect his wishes...It's neither your place nor mine to tell Jason what to do. Sometimes I think he is wrong, but I try to obey his wishes for you all's sake (Faulkner, 278). Caroline's insistence on clinging to old values such as an extreme submission to male authority contributes to her weakness as a mother and as a grandmother. Chabrier comments, " Women, beginning in pre-Civil War South, while trained to be the ideals of perfection and submission, were unmistakably given a social position inferior to that of men" (Chabrier, 58). Unfortunately, Caroline fits the role of " Southern Lady" in a time when this image is losing its importance. The Compson family is deteriorating, their land assets are decreasing, yet Caroline refuses to see what is happening, and change with the present. She believes that because she is a " lady," she will always have special privilege in society and even in the eyes of God. Self absorbed in her illusions, Caroline tells Dilsey that her son, Quentin, could not have had intentions to hurt her by committing suicide. " Under God's heaven what reason did he have? It can't be simply to flout and hurt me. Whoever God is, He would not permit that. I'm a lady" (Faulkner 299-300). Caroline clings to her naïve delusions of privilege while her family falls apart around her. Chabrier comments, "[The Southerner] must function in a universe in which both he and his accompanying value system are outmoded" (Chabrier, xi). Caroline banishes her daughter from the family, loses Quentin to suicide, her

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husband to a natural death, and is left with only the controlling and bitter Jason, and the “ idiot,” Benjy, whom she knows Jason will commit to the state hospital after she dies. Despite her emphasis on the importance of family heritage and her great efforts to maintain her image as a lady, Caroline is left lonely, unloved, and helpless. Chabrier remarks on the Southerner’s reluctance to cease living in the past. Faulkner’s work is a mirror of Southern society, which is a traditional, homogeneous world unwilling and unable to adapt to change. It is a society whose inhabitants try to continue their uniform perception of the world from a commonly held view of life and morality (Chabrier, 2). Because of Caroline’s efforts to maintain an outdated image, rather than become involved in affairs of the present, she is left completely powerless in the hands of Jason, uninvolved with decision making, helpless, and without hope. In contrast to her mother, Caddy has no concern for customs of the past. She displays this attitude through her lack of respect for authority, and her absence of concern in maintaining her image as an innocent virgin, as an unmarried woman should. From the time she is a child, she displays her tendencies to oppose her father’s wishes by climbing the tree in the middle of the night to watch the funeral. Despite Versh’s warning, “ Your paw told you to stay out that tree,” Caddy climbs it nonetheless. She counters, “ That was a long time ago...I expect he’s forgotten about it. Besides, he said to mind me tonight” (Faulkner, 39). Aside from this “ unladylike” behavior of tree climbing, Caddy differs from her mother in her ease in undermining male authority. John Earl Bassett notes, “ While the rest of the family remain frozen in time like Quentin, or ensnared in a self-centered past like her parents, or outside time like Benjy, Caddy is an attractively rebellious individual, the one Compson to assert her own

independence from the stultifying environment of her youth” (Bassett, 411). As Caddy grows older, she takes her rebelliousness a step further by beginning to “ experiment” with boys, despite the societal stigma against premarital sex. To Caddy’s mother, Caroline’s, generation, there are only two labels for unmarried women: virginity, connected to purity and innocence, and the opposite, promiscuity. Caddy, part of the new generation, does not see the importance in making such a distinction, and thus continues to have sexual relations, completely discounting society’s view that the value of a young woman is based upon her sexuality. Michael Gresset comments, It does not take [Caddy] long to solve the only problem with which she is confronted: that of [environment.] Within the social unit of the family, integration soon proves impossible: therefore...she will exclude herself from it, like a foreign body expelled (Gresset, 174). Whether Caddy is “ promiscuous” or merely “ progressive,” her lack of concern for being the image of a proper Southern lady, and resulting pregnancy, leads to her banishment from the family, and eventually separation from her daughter. Though Caddy, in some ways, acts as a foil to her mother, Caroline, their fates are similar. Like Caroline, Caddy ends up lonely, without any possibility of raising her daughter. Caddy pleads with Jason, first offering him money to reunite her with her daughter, then merely begging him to treat Quentin well. Listen, Jason...Don’t lie to me now. About her. I won’t ask to see anything. If that isn’t enough, I’ll send more each month. Just promise that she’ll [that she] You can do that. Things for her. Be kind to her. Little things that I cant, they wont let... (Faulkner, 209). Like her mother, Caddy is without power to influence Jason’s behavior. Caroline [sickly, old, and living in past illusions] is completely dependent on her son. Caddy, who chooses not to

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pay attention to past traditions and perceptions of being a lady, is also dependent on Jason, forced to rely on him to raise her daughter. Chabrier writes, "Faulkner's women are not themselves at the source of feminine evil but are instead the victims of codes and standards of behavior which are deleterious to them" (Chabrier, 78). Though Caroline and Caddy have opposing values, each is a victim of their environment. In a time of great social change, Caroline's old views on family structure and social hierarchy are losing the importance they had in the past. On the contrary, Caddy's disregard of tradition and image is frowned upon by a society that cannot easily dispose of old ways of thinking, leading to the separation of her daughter. Each woman finds it impossible to define their place in a time of social flux, resulting in tragedy for both.

Works Cited
Bassett, John Earl. "Family Conflict in *The Sound and the Fury*." *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982. pp. 408-424.
Chabrier, Gwendolyn. *Faulkner's Families, A Southern Saga*. New York: The Gordian Press, 1993. Chabrier analyzes the conflicts that arise within families in Faulkner's writing, exploring the relationships between married women and their husbands, parents and children, white people and black people, and incestual relationships that arise in several of Faulkner's novels and short stories. Chabrier points out that Faulkner "is, first, a Southerner, and his conception of family can be understood only within this very specific framework." The problems portrayed in Faulkner's families are largely a reaction to a changing Southern society. Chabrier calls Faulknerian families "doomed to incomprehension, isolation, rejection, ambivalence, domination, rebellion, and guilt." The author argues that the post-Civil War period brought great change to Southern family structure, but

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these changes were not easily adapted, as the South remained haunted by its past, refusing to move on, causing tension in all aspects of family life.

Recommended. Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage International, 1984. Gresset, Michael. "The Ordeal of Consciousness: Psychological Aspects of Evil in *The Sound and the Fury*." *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982. pp. 173-181.