Virginity and Southern Identity: A Study of Quentin Compson

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the role of virginity in two of William Faulkner's novels, namely *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. My essay ties the two novels together through the character study of Quentin Compson, a central figure in both texts. I argue that across both narratives, Quentin's decision-making is governed by his glorification of the concept of virginity, a notion he fails to clearly define yet dedicates extreme importance to. The realization of his own moral instability induces a crisis in Quentin, which eventually leads to his suicide. My essay contextualizes this act and argues that Quentin's obsession with virginity stems from a collection of values that are the legacy of the postbellum South. In order to discuss Quentin's crisis and analyze the value of virginity in Faulkner's work, this analysis extends to *Absalom, Absalom!*, particularly the character of Henry Sutpen.

Henry provides a contrast to Quentin in the sense that he is an active agent of his own fate, and through the murder he commits, he becomes what Quentin only fantasizes of becoming, a defender of (what both characters perceive as) the "purity" of a defenseless sister, and consequently a keeper of traditional Southern values. The glorification of sexual innocence (closely related to an idea of moral purity) acts as a catalyst for major acts committed by both characters. Key similarities and differences between Quentin and Henry are discussed in order to analyze Quentin's crisis that peaks in *The Sound and the Fury* but is contextualized in *Absalom, Absalom!*. My paper focuses on questions of moral identity and crisis, real and perceived values in the image Faulkner paints of the South, and the theme of incest and its relevance to Quentin's narrative. These issues are united in their shared discussion of virginity as a central theme in Faulkner's writing.

In order to conduct a clear, cohesive analysis of the texts, in the first chapter I provide an overview of the keywords of this essay, namely "identity" and "virginity". Taking into consideration the cultural and historical contexts of the analyzed texts, I discuss the relevance of these abstract notions in the early twentieth century American South.

In the second chapter of this essay, I write about definitions of virginity in both novels, mainly using passages attributed to Quentin and Mr Compson. I discuss the connection between virginity and honor and Quentin's passivity in both narratives, and points of similarity between Henry Sutpen and Quentin.

My third chapter is centered around the analysis of a passage from *The Sound and the Fury* that is most telling of Quentin's paradoxical attitude to sexuality and discuss how this attitude fits in with Quentin's system of morality.

In my last chapter, I focus specifically on the theme of incest in Quentin's narrative in *The Sound and the Fury*. Through an analysis of a crucial scene between Quentin and Caddy, I analyze the power of language and the ways in which Quentin substitutes real action with words throughout his narrated section of the novel. I also write about the incest theme in regards to the relationship between Henry, Judith and Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

1. Theoretical background: defining virginity and identity

There is a vast number of approaches to the question of identity. Two broad approaches are commonly discussed in academic literature: the individualistic approach and the social and cultural approach. The first of these approaches, emerging in the 19th and 20th centuries, emphasizes the role of the individual in constructing their own identity. In Philip Gleason's highly influential publication on identity, titled "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History" (1983), he credits Erik H. Erikson with the popularization of the question of identity and explains that Erikson's approach defined identity as ingrained "in the deep psychic structure of the individual" (Gleason 918).

On the other hand, the social and cultural approach emphasizes the crucial role of external factors in shaping one's identity. In his doctoral dissertation titled "The Division of Labor in Society" (1893), Émile Durkheim argues that individuals are shaped by their social environment, and the values and norms of the society which they are part of. Durkheim writes: "At the same time as societies, individuals are transformed through the changes occurring in the number of social units and their relationships" (Durkheim 283). Durkheim's writing contributed to the development of the social and cultural approach to identity, which later scholars and researchers continued to expand upon. According to Gleason, the major difference between the Eriksonian and the sociological/interactionist approaches is whether identity is "understood as something internal that persists through change" or as "an artifact of interaction between the individual and society" (Gleason 918).

While building my analysis of the theme of Southern identity in Faulkner's fiction, I am taking into consideration the cultural and historical contexts in which his works were produced. Though both previously mentioned broad approaches to the question of identity are useful to consider, the social and cultural approach may be more appropriate in the case of this analysis. In my interpretation of these novels, the historical context and factors such as race and gender

are pivotal elements of the analyzed characters' identities. Faulkner's work expresses collective tragedy through the personal, individual tragedies of his characters: for example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, the personal crises of the individual members of the Compson family parallel the collective crisis of the post-Civil War American South. This is most evident in the case of Quentin Compson, whose identity is so inextricably linked to his Southern heritage that the breakdown of the Old South and its values leads to his own personal breakdown. His identity is firmly rooted in the second-hand memories of an old, glorious Old South, and therefore the most appropriate way of analyzing his character is by using a framework that takes into consideration the historical and social environment of the South that produced him.

This brings us to my next point, which is the analysis and definition of Southern identity. Now that I have established that I subscribe to the sociological understanding of identity rather than the Eriksonian approach, I will move on to a discussion of what Southern identity means in the light of this broad definition. James C. Cobb writes extensively about the roots of Southern identity and locates the beginning of the emergence of the South as the American "other" in the nation's parting from England. The author argues that following the American Revolution, an immediate point of contrast was needed to replace England as the "primary negative reference" for America (Cobb 3). Out of this need for a point of reference emerged the image of the South as a distinct economic, social and cultural unit within America. Cobb emphasizes slavery and plantation-based agriculture as the roots of the North-South divide, though also states that the distinction was not purely economic (Cobb 40). Social and cultural factors, such as the differing definitions of virtue, honor and identity between North and South were also crucial. While the idea of honor in the North was closely related to Puritan values, the South depended on a definition rooted in the concept of white male dominance and traditional masculinity (Cobb 41). The early inculcation of the sense of "white masterhood" in white Southern boys presented itself in early displays of virility and aggression, encouraged and expected by the parents (Wyatt-Brown 154). The Southern code of honor demanded utmost obedience to the father and submission to figures of common authority, while the authority of the mother declined as the child grew older (Wyatt-Brown 157, 159).

The issues of race, identity, masculinity and relations to authority are major themes in both novels I analyze in this paper. In order to contextualize Quentin's anxieties and ambivalence towards his family and the South, we must consider the social context of his upbringing. Many parents in the Old South relied on "community wisdom about death, honor, and battle glory" for guidance, and therefore subconsciously fostered inherently ambivalent, contradictory feelings and latent hostilities in their children: this resulted in a view of family

lineage that was simultaneously a source of great pride and of "persistent compulsiveness and sometimes tragic disorder" (Wyatt-Brown 174). Nowhere in Faulkner's fiction is this more evident than in the case of Quentin, whose unceasing attempts to conceal and control his strong resentment towards his own ancestry is ultimately what reveals these repressed emotions. His reliance on abstractions renders him unable to function in a changing, material world, where the value of his Southern identity is rapidly decreasing, and is at the risk of extinction. Quentin is incompatible with the future world because he cannot separate himself from the past. By committing suicide, Quentin avoids confronting the passing of time and freezes himself in time rather than growing old and witnessing the complete decomposition of the Old South, and hence the basis of his own identity.

The last keyword of this research paper is *virginity*, a notion equally as abstract and difficult to define as the preceding ones. The concept of virginity in the South was a social value, a metaphysical merit firmly rooted in the dehumanization of women by putting them on a pedestal beyond and above sexuality. The Southern worship of the virginal woman was the product of a variety of cultural impacts and phenomena, such as "chivalry, Puritanism, and white superiority", and peaked with the equation of the ideal female figure with the South itself (Kerr 4). As stated before, courage and personal integrity were key aspects of Southern identity, however, their manifestations varied between the sexes. In the case of women, courage was largely displayed through resilience, the acceptance of one's fate, and protection of the family (Wyatt-Brown 234).

As Faulkner puts it in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the social environment that raised Henry Sutpen recognized three categories of women: "ladies, women, females" (109), or as later put, "ladies or whores or slaves" (114). The categories are separate, and two of them are divided by "a chasm which could be crossed but one time and in but one direction" (109). In the case of the cosmopolitan Charles Bon, this categorization does not suffice. When Henry objects to Charles' marriage to a mulatto courtesan by saying "But a bought woman. A whore." (115), Bon does not let Henry call the woman a whore, and finally tells him "Sometimes I believe they are the only true chaste women, not to say virgins, in America" (117). Henry, a youth of the Old South, is "corrupted" (110) by Bon's world: his notions of purity are violated as he is exposed to an "opulent, sensuous, sinful" (110) world much too alien to his own. The fact of Charles' marriage to the mulatto woman is profoundly disturbing and unacceptable according to the rigid categorization at the core of Henry's Southern spirit.

While men were allowed sexual freedom, women were denied the same privilege. It is evident in Faulkner's narratives that virginity is not perceived the same way in the case of men

and women. Virginity was sanctified and glorified in women, who were expected to hold on to their chastity in order to preserve family honor and fortify the great Southern values of modesty and self-restraint. Illicit sexual relations, especially if they resulted in pregnancy could cause women a lifetime of condemnation: Caddy Compson, Lena Grove, and Dewey Dell were all forced to endure humiliation because of their sexuality. Their misfortunes were largely due to the dehumanizing Southern code of conduct that either sanctified women as young virgins, regarded them as matrons, or branded them as fallen women.

While a woman's virginity was a glorified social expectation, young Southern men were expected to lose their virginity by the time they entered college (Wyatt-Brown 296). In *The Sound and the Fury,* Quentin, having just started his studies at Harvard, is acutely aware of the social consequences of his own virginity as he states "In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it." (65). Virginity was a social category reserved for women, while if a man was a virgin, his sexual inexperience after a certain age would arise suspicion and ridicule (Wyatt-Brown 296).

The aim of this paper is to analyze Quentin Compson's character against the backdrop of the social and cultural context of the Old South, considering the pivotal value of virginity as the cornerstone of Southern identity. Quentin's neurosis is directly related to his inability to accept that his sister is no longer the sanctified, Southern virgin he would like her to be, and can never return to that artificial and dehumanizing state again. Quentin's obsession with virginity is a result of his adherence to a contradictory, elusive and mythical Old Southern moral framework, which fails him in practice time after time.

2. A "false quantity" – Virginity and honor

In this chapter of my essay, I aim to contextualize Quentin's obsession with virginity that is evident in *The Sound and the Fury* using excerpts from both the former novel and from *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Quentin's inner conflict finds expression through his construction of the story of the Sutpen family. Quentin is at the intersection of the two related narratives, joining together *Absalom, Absalom!*, where his Southern identity is put into perspective, and *The Sound and the Fury*, where he finally succumbs to a lonely death, crushed by the weight of his dark heritage. On the following pages, I provide a detailed analysis of some of those passages from both texts that I deem the most telling of Quentin's contradictory, complex definition of the notion of virginity that forms the basis of his system of morality. I aim to point

out how Quentin's sense of displacement and emotional agony stem from the inherited, second-hand tragedy into which he was born.

In Quentin's narrated section of *The Sound and the Fury,* the words "Father said" are like "an obsessive refrain" (Ross 254), returning over and over again to separate Quentin's own ideas from his father's pessimistic rhetoric. Mr Compson's arguments not only fail to provide Quentin with any comfort or affection, they hinder Quentin's every attempt at finding moral stability and worsen his already dire mental state. On page 87 of *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin remembers his father saying "man is the sum of his misfortunes" (87). Quentin's greatest misfortune is arguably his own Southern heritage, something he compulsively denies hating yet clearly struggles to bear the weight of. Faulkner's later novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* provides further context on the tradition Quentin emerges from, deepening the reader's understanding of his contradictory feelings about the South, about his own family, and about the notions of moral and sexual purity.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the crux of Quentin's problems, his obsession with his sister's virginity, is never explicitly referenced (Ragan 393). In this novel, Quentin is one of the various narrators of the Sutpen story, which trickles down to him through a series of other speakers, most importantly his father, who had heard it from his own father before him. The major plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* may be viewed as a prefiguration of the Compson story, especially in regards to Quentin's fate. When he meets Henry on Sutpen's Hundred, Quentin catches a glimpse of his own demise in Henry's ruins, hence why recounting that encounter to Shreve in Chapter IX distresses him to the point of shaking uncontrollably while lying in bed and talking. One of the major revelations *Absalom, Absalom!* offers the reader is that Quentin does not construct his moral code but inherits it from a decaying Southern tradition: he is handed down a tragedy that is "second-hand" (*The Sound and the Fury*, 87).

Considering the convoluted narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!*, each character that tells the Sutpen story molds and mutilates it according to their own biases and interpretations. Thoughts Mr Compson verbalizes in this novel echo statements attributed to him in *The Sound and the Fury*. His words on the nature of virginity are of particular importance in this analysis. Theorizing about the relationship between Henry and Bon, Mr Compson says the following to Quentin in Chapter IV of *Absalom, Absalom!*:

> Henry was the provincial, the clown almost, given to instinctive and violent action rather than to thinking who may have been conscious that his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity was

> a false quantity which must incorporate in itself an inability to endure in order to be precious, to exist, and so must depend on its loss, absence, to have existed at all. (96)

Mr Compson's definition of virginity as a "false quantity" reflects his conviction that there is no lasting value in virginity, as it is a concept defined by its own absence, something that must inevitably pass for it to have meant anything at all. Far from being an objective storyteller, Mr Compson's nihilistic sentiments saturate his reconstruction of the Henry-Bon story. In his imagined version of events, Henry is a fool whose dedication to the meaningless notion of his sister's virginity has led to his downfall. In this regard, Henry and Quentin are alike, and so is the fate they share, which is a tragic, untimely demise – however, there is no indication in the text that Mr Compson recognizes the similarities between the man he calls a "clown", and his own son, who sits and listens to his speech.

Quentin, in the midst of his agonizing flashbacks in *The Sound and the Fury*, recalls an almost identical statement by his father: "Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature" (97). Quentin's defeated answer is "That's just words" (97), a response that does not even attempt to dispute his father's definitive conclusion but instead serves as a springboard for Mr Compson's next, crushing statement, "So is virginity" (97). To Quentin, the idea that virginity is nothing more than a temporary state is catastrophic: haunted by the loss of Caddy's virginity, and Mr Compson's ruthless conviction that it never even existed to begin with ("Women are never virgins", 97), the only passage to purity is through the unimaginable, ultimate sin of incest that could "save" Caddy but that Quentin would not commit.

Quentin's resistance of action and physicality differentiates him from Henry. While Henry is characterized by "instinctive and violent action" (96), and Mr Compson even goes as far as to say that Henry "never thought" (96), Quentin is debilitated by his own inaction and his constantly racing mind. In *The Sound and the Fury,* Quentin's basic, unresolvable dilemma is how to preserve that which is temporary, how to stop time and the inevitable moral depravity he associates with sexual activity. Since his "conception of action was so hopelessly romantic", Quentin's experience of life remains defined by abstractions rather than actions (Ross 252). There are multiple passages from the text that support this statement, such as the suicide pact scene between Quentin and Caddy, which will be analyzed later. Another such passage is Quentin's recollections of recovery after breaking his leg, described on page 95 of *The Sound and the Fury*.

Similarly to the other intrusively resurfacing memories Quentin battles with, this one also comes to him in fragments, sentences hanging in the air and snippets of dialogues mixing with his own internal monologue. As Quentin struggles to fight off the memories of a conversation with Caddy, the sentence "*Then they told me the bone would have to be broken again*" (95, Faulkner's italics) suddenly occurs in his mind. In the recollection that unfolds from this statement, we can differentiate between three distinct voices: Quentin's own as he remembers his pain ("*my jaw-muscles getting numb and my mouth saying Wait Wait just a minute through the sweat ah ah ah behind my teeth*"), his father's cursing ("*and Father damn that horse damn that horse*") and Dilsey telling Quentin off for walking around on his broken leg ("*you goin to ruin yoself ain't you got no mo sense than that not fo days since you bruck hit*"). These voices occur without any marked line of separation, creating the distressing, characteristic murmur of Quentin's "loud world" (150).

Quentin's voice admits to his own mistake: "*Wait it's my fault. He came along the fence every morning with a basket toward the kitchen dragging a stick along the fence every morning I dragged myself to the window cast and all*" (95). The unnamed "he" is presumably one of Caddy's pursuers, who is seen and heard coming to the Compson house daily. Not only does Quentin drag himself to the window, he waits for the boy "*with a piece of coal*", presumably planning an ambush on the unsuspecting lover. James M. Mellard, in his study of the Quentin section as a "Tragedy of Passion," writes that Quentin's broken leg keeping him from confronting Caddy's presumed lover is a "phallic wound" foreshadowing his inadequacy in his later conflict with Dalton Ames and therefore his complete (physical and psychological) failure to guard Caddy's virginity (Mellard 70).

Quentin's torment is not exclusively psychological but extends to the torture of his body, too. Shreve's later remark when he tells Quentin that he cannot "hold his blood" (*The Sound and the Fury*, 140) indeed proves to be true: Quentin's frequent involvement in physical confrontation, the instances of him spilling his blood and the poorly healed bone that has to be broken again all reflect Quentin's inner agony that arises from his obsessive protection of his sister's virginity. Quentin's own virginity, paired with his monumental suffering makes him a martyr-like figure in a world that neither understands nor values the degree of his extreme dedication and sacrifice.

The broken leg healing incorrectly and having to be reset is a seemingly minor detail that blends in with the rest of Quentin's stream-of-consciousness narrative, however, when considered from up-close, this incident encompasses Quentin's incessant, painful attempts at protecting values bigger than himself. His own admittance to waiting "every morning" and

taking the painful steps to the window, yet not being able to take action confirms Quentin's passivity, how he lives vicariously through imagined scenarios but is inadequate in actual reality.

In the numerous instances when Quentin imagines himself taking violent action, such as when he threatens Dalton Ames but faints in the face of actual conflict, or when he fantasizes about hurting Herbert, he is driven by a fierce desire to protect the values he deems the most valuable, namely virginity, and family honor. However, strong as his motivations may be, the only tool at his disposal is language, out of which he constructs empty threats which oftentimes even he realizes sound ridiculous. Such is the case as he thinks "my mouth said it I didnt say it at all" before uttering the theatrical warning "Ill give you till sundown" (135) to Dalton Ames. Though he engages in physical fights rather impulsively (such as when he beats T.P. for getting Benjy drunk, an episode Benjy narrates on page 16), these conflicts either end with his humiliation or make no substantial difference in the long run. Quentin's participation in these fights may seem paradoxical at first: though he is repeatedly beaten, he resorts to violence time and time again. Quentin, by not shying away from physical conflict, acts upon a code of behavior typical of Southern youth: fighting was one of a series of ways (gambling, swearing, drinking, etc.) in which young men could display their virility (Wyatt-Brown 164). However, Quentin is frequently defeated, and his humiliations are of both a physical and a sexual nature. Both in the case of physical altercations and sexual behavior, Quentin fails to assert his masculinity according to the traditional expectations of his social environment.

In *Absalom, Absalom!,* Quentin takes on the role of an obedient listener, first sitting in Miss Rosa's airless room and absorbing her version of the Sutpen story, then listening to his father's long monologues. Even when Quentin is the one speaking, the Sutpen tale passes through him as if he was merely a vessel for somebody else's tragedy (again recalling the idea of the inherited tragedy that characterizes Quentin's crisis). Quentin is mostly a passive observer, absorbing stories, real or imagined, of a family he never really knew, yet whose legacy he carries within himself due to his Southern roots. Quentin's passivity is in sharp contrast with Henry Sutpen's fierce action: this contrast is evident to the reader from the moment they find out that Henry had murdered Bon. To Quentin, the climactic point when he faces the tragic consequences of Henry's actions is when the two of them meet in the Sutpen house, a crucial episode in the novel.

At the start of Chapter IX, Quentin is lying in his bed, about to tell Shreve his memories of the night he visited Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa. Quentin's account is by no means complete: the text does not reveal the full extent of Quentin's experience or give a detailed,

much less an objective description of exactly what Quentin might have witnessed that night. The complexity of Quentin's emotional and psychological response to his encounter with Henry suggests that Quentin's experience on Sutpen's Hundred may have been more complex than what he is willing to confess to. It is likely that the text does not record Quentin's full experience due to his own unwillingness to recall those in detail (Ragan 341). This establishes another parallel between Quentin's character in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *Absalom, Absalom!*: Quentin's repression of his own memories suggests that the experience of seeing Henry has stirred his self-awareness, resulting in the partial recognition of his own errors. This gradual process of Quentin realizing his own fallibility culminates in a scene I describe in detail in the next chapter of my essay, where he questions his own dedication to the abstract concept of virginity that both him as an individual and the cultural context he was raised in glorify inordinately.

3. "If it wasn't anything then what was I…" – The collapse of identity

Quentin's focus on virginity encapsulates his obsession with cleanliness and avoidance of physicality. At points, his own madness reveals itself to Quentin, as he realizes that sexual innocence cannot bring him the perpetual innocence he yearns for.

> I thought about how I'd thought about I could not be a virgin, with so many of them walking along in the shadows and whispering with their soft girl voices lingering in the shadowy places and the words coming out and perfume and eyes you could feel not see, but if it was that simple to do it wouldn't be anything and if it wasn't anything then what was I. (124)

A reader not yet familiar with the novel may initially accept Quentin's extreme fixation on virginity as an indication that he feels no sexual desire and has no interest in sex (Bowling 471). However, once Quentin confesses that he had experienced temptation and thought he "could not be a virgin," that assumption is disproven. The girls "walking around in the shadows" have indeed tempted Quentin, though his commitment to moral purity had evidently outweighed any desire he might have experienced. The wording of the text suggests that Quentin believed at one point that he could not remain a virgin, while the words of his father, validated by Quentin's own later thoughts and actions, make it evident that Quentin could never be anything *but* a virgin: "And Father said it's because you are a virgin: don't you see?" (97).

Mr Compson's words are not only reminders of Quentin's physical inexperience, but of an innocence he possesses that is "contrary to nature" (97). Quentin's resistance of sexuality therefore can be for no other reason but his 'unnatural' obsession with a vague notion of purity he chose to subscribe to in the absence of more meaningful, substantial values.

Quentin's resistance to his sexual desires may be due to two main factors: his conviction that women are emblems of eternal purity, and his awareness of the words of his father contradicting this very conviction. The clash between these beliefs leaves Quentin both condemning and fearing sexuality, therefore he resists not only his own carnal desires but objects to the existence of Caddy's, too. Quentin's concept of women as emblems of innocence and purity is disputed by Mr Compson's words: "Because women so delicate so mysterious Father said. Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced." (108). According to Mr Compson, women, though "delicate" and "mysterious", are inherently filthy: this is in direct contradiction with Quentin's own beliefs about women, especially Caddy, embodying true purity. Mr Compson's use of the word "filth" is remarkable: his view of women as vessels of "periodical filth" has evidently left its mark on Quentin, whose association of sexuality with dirtiness is hereby contextualized by his father's words. Mr Compson's statement conjoins blood with filth, the female menstrual cycle with the idea of a recurrent, inevitable defilement that soils an otherwise "delicate" female existence. Female fertility therefore becomes 'filth', and Quentin's noble belief in women as emblems of innocence slowly crumbles, until the only thing he can cling to in order to find everlasting purity is the hope of a lifelong punishment for a sexual deviance he would not commit.

Faulkner uses the term "periodical filth" again in his 1932 novel, *Light in August*, when a young Joe Christmas listens attentively as a fellow teenager educates him and four other boys about the female menstrual cycle, and the group is moved as they think of women, the "superior shape in which volition dwelled doomed to be at stated and inescapable intervals victims of periodical filth" (140). A similar atmosphere of mystery, uncertainty and a degree of aversion characterizes the attitude towards women and sexuality in *The Sound and the Fury.* Quentin's uncertainty about what to make of his own sexual urges and morals may be the product of an environment that either mystifies or objectifies women but fails to ever regard them as people equal in aptitude to the men they coexist with. In this sense, Mr Compson's lectures to Quentin do not represent a unique attitude, it is Quentin's sensitivity that is unusual, hence why Mr Compson assumes that Quentin's virginity is the reason he does not understand sexuality ("O That That's Chinese I don't know Chinese. And Father said it's because you are a virgin", 97).

Mr Compson's statements contradict Quentin's "innocent idealism" (Mellard 72) and dismantle all his heroic convictions. Quentin is left in a confused state where he sees girls "walking along in the shadows" but the words of his father telling him women "have an affinity for evil" (80) and his own obsession with virginity as the only way to preserve innocence render him unable and unwilling to pursue any of the girls. The clash of his intrinsic desire to believe in the eternal purity of women and his father's teachings he had grown up listening to paralyze Quentin and he is caught between his own beliefs and his father's, desperately searching for meaning in either. Quentin fails to find a point of stability and eventually his suicide, lying on the "lonely, inviolate sand" (66) is the only attainable state of purity left to him.

In one instance, during the branch scene I analyze in detail in the next chapter, Caddy asks Quentin a rather patronizing, rhetorical question "youve never done that have you", to which Quentin replies with a transparent lie "yes yes lots of times with lots of girls" (128). The text offers no further commentary on Quentin's words, but the denial of his own virginity indicates his ambivalent feelings about his sexual inexperience. The wording of Caddy's question implies she already knows the answer, yet Quentin still lies, refusing to endure the humiliation that would further confirm his own 'weakness' compared to Dalton Ames, whose virility is his one defining characteristic in the text. This supports my argument that Quentin's attitude to sexuality is multifaceted and his virginity is something he both holds sacred and feels a compulsion to deny.

Quentin, for whom the mere thought of sexual attraction is shrouded in guilt, sees virginity as the only way to reinvigorate the elusive Compson family honor. To Quentin, Caddy's promiscuity signifies not only the loss of her own innocence, but the erosion of family virtues, too. Though Quentin, in accordance with the Southern tradition, holds virginity sacred, at times he becomes aware of the futility of his efforts and the lapses in his judgment. Once the spark of recognition ignites a fire within him, Quentin is unable to think clearly and escape the suffocating memories of his missteps. In the quote at the start of this subchapter, Quentin's recognition of the falsity of his beliefs is evident. The moment he realizes that he had dedicated an excessively large significance to virginity, the realization of his own lack of a solid identity dawns upon him. Though he admits that he had thought he could not remain a virgin with all those girls around him, he then thinks "but if it was that simple to do it wouldn't be anything". If it was that easy to be "unvirgin" (65), then the effort he had put into remaining one had been wasted, as it was simply a meaningless state, or worse, just a word, as Mr Compson had suggested ("That's just words and he said So is virginity", 97). This would both render Quentin's efforts meaningless and validate his father's cynical arguments. Admitting to this

colossal lapse in judgment would also tear apart Quentin's idealistic belief in a morally reliable and just Southern tradition. If virginity means nothing, then Southern morality that sanctified it is also false, unreliable, elusive and impossible to sustain.

Quentin asking "if it wasn't anything then what was I" is the moment in his chapter where he exhibits the highest degree of self-awareness his character is capable of. Quentin's identity crumbles before his very eyes as he realizes that his suffering might have been in vain. The meaninglessness of his anguish occurs to him at a later point in the section, too, as he thinks: "all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered… inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed" (144). Quentin's loss of values, as he comes to realize the meaninglessness of the things he had dedicated himself to, contributes significantly to his mental collapse and suicide. I suggest that Quentin is driven to suicide not exclusively by his awareness of Caddy's sexuality (and its tarnishing of the family name) but by his recognition of his own errors and the futility of his lifelong struggle to find and conserve innocence. The lines I had quoted at the start of the subchapter reveal Quentin's repression of sexual temptation, his uncertainty around sexuality and perhaps most importantly, his recognition of the instability of the moral structure he had built his life upon.

However, prior to his partial recognition of his false beliefs (which becomes evident in the quote on page 124) Quentin's search for innocence, morality and meaning is persistent. From the way he reacts to Gerald Bland's disrespectful, obscene stories about "his women" (141), it is clear that Quentin is provoked by Gerald's boasting, as it contradicts Quentin's vision of women as emblems of purity. Quentin's question to Gerald "Did you ever have a sister?" (140) voices his deepest wound, a conflicting attitude to sexuality, to women and sisters, who Quentin cannot help but associate with "shadowy places" (124), but wishes to protect from further moral defilement.

Though Quentin himself calls Caddy a whore (134) and is deeply wounded by his awareness of her sexual indulgences, when Gerald or Dalton Ames speak down on women, particularly on sisters (in the case of Dalton Ames: "did you ever have a sister did you, no but they're all bitches", 135), Quentin's sensitivity about his own sister prompts him to turn to violence and start a heroic duel that he knows he is destined to lose every time. His inevitable failure is due to the "magnitude of his attempt" (St. Clair 318) and not his lack of a solid effort. Quentin admits to Spoade and Shreve that he had attacked Gerald fully aware that Gerald had been learning boxing (Quentin says to his friends that Gerald has "been going to Mike's every day, over in town", 140). However, Gerald's foul mouthed boasting about women was still

enough to provoke a physical altercation, which was bound to end in Quentin's utter humiliation. For this reason, I argue that the interpretations of Quentin's character as a "half-baked Galahad" (92) or a "romantic failure" (St. Clair 317) are not necessarily incorrect but insufficient. Quentin's noble but largely ineffective fight to establish meaning in a morally insubstantial world does indeed make him something of a heroic failure, however, he is in no way passive or bloodless. Though his anguish may be gnawing at him from the inside, externally, Quentin makes an effort to perform actions in accordance with his moral code – this making him a tragic hero taking action in a world "paralyzed by moral inaction" (St. Clair 328).

4. "I was afraid she might" – Incest and inaction

The primary aim of this chapter is to analyze the sexual overtones of the conversation that takes place between Quentin and Caddy in the "branch scene", and based on this analysis, draw conclusions about the nature of Quentin's incestuous fantasies in the text.

Regarding the Quentin section's convoluted narrative, I side with the widely accepted argument (accepted by notable Faulkner scholars such as Noel Polk, whose work I also cite in this essay) that the decomposition of language in the Quentin section reflects Quentin's declining mental state. His efforts to contain his thoughts within the borders of rationality continuously fail, as his coherent descriptions of present actions keep getting interrupted by repressed past memories he fails to restrain (Polk 110). The three most deeply repressed memories in Quentin's subconscious come to him in their entirety after he is beaten unconscious by Gerald Bland. The three different flashbacks that play out before Quentin snaps back into consciousness are the following: first, his conversation with Caddy by the branch, the subject of my analysis, then his humiliating encounter with Dalton Ames on the bridge, and finally, another, equally as humiliating and painful scene with Caddy. This trio of flashbacks form the Quentin section's most textually puzzling segment: as Quentin passes out, his narration is fractured, and the dam that had kept his most agonizing memories at bay bursts, allowing the text to completely spiral out of control and abandon all grammatical conventions. Each sentence of Quentin and Caddy's dialogue occupies a line of its own, forming a loose body of text absent of capitalization and punctuation. The dialogue is intersected only by Quentin's hasty descriptions of movements, gestures and the location (e.g.: "she leaned back on her arms her hands locked about her knees", 128), and is saturated with sexual undertones.

The episode begins suddenly, with the uncapitalized statement "one minute she was standing there the next he was yelling and pulling at her dress" (125-126). The same memory, only slightly differently worded had occurred in the text earlier, (see "*One minute she was standing in the door*", 66 or "*one minute she was standing in the door the next minute he was pulling at her dress…*", 104-105) which demonstrates Quentin's falling ability to control his thoughts as the section advances. Having lost authority over his thoughts by passing out, Quentin has no choice but to let the agonizing flashback invade his consciousness.

The previous two times this fragment of Quentin's past had pushed itself into his consciousness, the meaning was largely ambiguous, however, this time, the reader can conclude from the context that the text is describing Benjy's reaction to Caddy after she loses her virginity. Benjy can tell that something had changed about her and tries to "shove her into the bathroom" (126) then later cries and yells when he sees her ("when she came in to supper T.P. was feeding him he started again just whimpering at first until she touched him then he yelled", 126). The memory suddenly cuts to Quentin running down to the branch where Caddy is laying with her body in the water ("I ran down the hill in that vacuum of crickets like a breath travelling across a mirror she was lying in the water her head on the sand", 126). Sitting by the water with Caddy, Quentin asks her the most daring question on his mind: "do you love him" (127).

Caddy gives the following response to Quentin's question: "her hand came out I didn't move it fumbled down my arm and she held my hand flat against her chest her heart thudding" (127). With his open palm against Caddy's chest, Quentin receives an answer more visceral and more devastating than he could tolerate, and he begins a desperate plea for Caddy to deny her feelings for Dalton Ames. Caddy's surging blood as a mark of sexual and romantic attraction in this scene signals that in Quentin's narrative, representations of "filth" (such as blood or mud) are equal to moral corruption. Caddy's sexual attraction to Dalton Ames, a man who has "crossed all the oceans all around the world" (127), and who Quentin himself describes as looking like "he was made out of bronze" (134), signals Quentin's ultimate failure to protect Caddy's purity and the failure of his own virility opposite to Dalton's.

Though the loss of Caddy to another man is nearly intolerable to Quentin, he manages to find a glimmer of hope among the ruins of his masculinity. Begging for Caddy to deny her attraction to Dalton, Quentin says to her "did he make you then he made you do it let him he was stronger than you" (127). Though by this point in the section, the reader is intimately familiar with Quentin's neurosis, I believe it is this conversation with Caddy that really cracks the outer layers of his character and reveals the true depth of his twisted obsession. His begging for Caddy to admit to have been raped reveals his savage selfishness that would sooner accept

Caddy's rape, an avengeable act ("Ill kill him I swear I will", 127), than her decision to lose her virginity, an act of free will. The dialogue shows that Quentin hopes not only that Caddy does not love Dalton Ames but that she had been sexually violated by him, so that there would be something to avenge, and the hollow, indefinite frustrations within Quentin's soul could gain substance and therefore be exorcised by the killing of Dalton Ames.

While Quentin repeatedly begs for Caddy to deny her romantic feelings for Dalton Ames, she remains silent and holds Quentin's hand against her chest, then moves it up to her throat, where her blood steadily beats against Quentin's palm ("she moved my hand up against her throat her heart was hammering there", 127). The gesture substitutes all verbal responses on Caddy's behalf until she puts an end to Quentin's relentless begging ("Caddy you hate him dont you") and says to him "yes I hate him I would die for him Ive already died for him I die for him over and over again every time this goes" (127). Without punctuation and the clear separation of clauses, the text conveys the urgency and tension of the conversation. Directly before snapping out of consciousness at the start of this episode, Quentin hears Caddy say "*When they touched me I died*" (125), which is one in a series of statements by Caddy that indicate a parallel between death and sex (Bauer 77). Janet St. Clair explains this parallel by saying that Caddy shares her family members' "histrionic condemnations of her conduct" and therefore sees in her own sexual promiscuity the reflection of moral decay (St. Clair 328). St. Clair's argument, which I thoroughly agree with, is also supported by the text as Caddy repeatedly confesses to her own feelings of being doomed: "Im bad anyway you cant help it" (133).

Quentin offers a suicide pact to Caddy, telling her "it wont take a second just a second then I can do mine" (128), to which Caddy responds with an eerie, calm agreement ("all right", 128). The language that their dialogue picks up is unmistakably suggestive throughout: sentences such as "no like this you'll have to push it harder" and "touch your hand to it" occur without commentary, giving the text obvious sexual connotations. Quentin begins to cry ("dont cry" Caddy says to him, and he responds "Im not crying Caddy", however, a few lines later, Caddy says again "dont cry poor Quentin" and Quentin admits "but I couldnt stop", suggesting that Quentin indeed had been crying throughout the suicide pact scene described on page 128) and hesitates to carry out his proposition. Caddy urges him to go through with the act and says to him "push it are you going to", prompting Quentin to ask her again "do you want me to" (128). This response from Quentin is important to note, as it makes it obvious that Quentin's bold offer of murder was a mere fantasy, a desperate plea rather than a viable plan.

The reader (or Quentin) may interpret the same dialogue as either Caddy's agreement to have intercourse with Quentin or to die by his hand: since the text had already established a

parallel between sex and death, the two options are entwined with one another (Bauer 78). The knife, being a phallic symbol in the scene, becomes completely ineffective in Quentin's hands, and his inability to carry out either the murder-suicide he proposes or the sexual act suggests Quentin's failure at overcoming his indecision. Quentin dropping his knife at the end of the scene ("its my knife I dropped it", 129) supports this argument, as he had not only 'wasted' his chance but he also drops the weapon he had attempted to use just moments before, losing his very last opportunity to spring to action.

Quentin's failure to go through with the suicide pact (or the act of incest, depending on the reading) is not a great shock: Quentin's perhaps greatest flaw is his idealism and his sense of displacement in the real world, among its real actions. When his father asks him whether he had tried to force Caddy to commit incest with him, Quentin tells him (or imagines telling him) "i was afraid she might and then it wouldnt have done any good" (150). The language of the scene by the branch confirms that the act itself is secondary to the mere idea of the act, and the anticipation of its eternal punishment. Quentin's refusal to commit either incest or murder suggests neither a degree of sanity nor kindness on his behalf but a state of mind so profoundly disturbed that imagination can completely substitute reality, and one no longer has to commit an act to be punished for it.

It is evident from the episode I analyzed in this chapter that between his deep, all-consuming wish to "purify" Caddy, and his pathological obsession with virginity, Quentin is paralyzed by the foundational conflicts that obstruct his confidence in his own values. To commit incest would mean to cease being a virgin, while remaining a virgin means he cannot even rely on his fantasy of standing with Caddy "*amid the pointing and the horror walled by the clean flame*" (98, Faulkner's italics) in his imagined afterlife for a sense of stability. Unable to either push the knife and carry out his bold proposition of murder or to accept the existence of Caddy's sexuality, Quentin is utterly defeated. After they leave the branch, Caddy goes to meet Dalton Ames, which is yet another blow to Quentin's already crushed sense of masculinity.

Though the fantasy of incest occurs in Quentin's mind frequently, it is a fantasy of purification, not of sexual deviance. By attempting to minimize Caddy's "impurity" by imagining himself substituting her lovers, Quentin makes incest an instrument of restoration, meant to nullify the perceived damage Caddy's sexual promiscuity had done to the concepts of virtue and purity. The true objective of Quentin's fantasy is to eliminate change and send himself and Caddy to a place beyond time and even beyond hell ("*If it could just be a hell*

beyond that", 98, Faulkner's italics), where – once they have committed the ultimate sin – no greater pain or further degradation could affect them.

The last major point in connection with the theme of incest that I would like to make is that in both narratives discussed in this essay, incest is assigned a symbolical function and serves as a metaphor for the collapse of the deep South, that had been "dead since 1865" (*Absalom, Absalom!*, 9). In *The Sound and the Fury,* Quentin's family background is assumed to be the catalyst for his mental deterioration, while *Absalom, Absalom!* places his tragedy in a wider cultural and historical context (Zender 750). In both narratives, the incest theme serves as a vessel for the destruction of ideals and abstract notions: most notably the ideals of sexual/moral purity, and in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Thomas Sutpen's hopes of building a great Southern dynasty.

In the case of *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson children are born into a decadent South whose great past they are aware of but in which they find no comfort or possibility of revival. It is Jason, the most unlikely candidate for such perceptive remarks, who later comments on the nature of their inheritance with bitter sarcasm: "Blood, I says, governors and generals. It's a damn good thing we never had any kings and presidents; we'd all be down there at Jackson chasing butterflies" (195).

Quentin's own hatred of the South is far more repressed than his brother's and only surfaces at times, such as in his desperate cry to Caddy: "theres a curse on us its not our fault is it our fault" (133) or in his answer to Shreve's tone-deaf question in *Absalom, Absalom!* (" 'Why do you hate the South?' 'I don't hate it,' Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately", 378). When theorizing about the love triangle between Henry, Judith and Bon, Quentin and Shreve suggest that Bon was not only aware of his relation to Judith but decided to go ahead with the marriage specifically in order to avenge his father, whose ambitions of starting a great Southern dynasty would be destroyed by the incestuous marriage between his son and daughter. In this narrative (and in the version of it that Quentin and Shreve create), incest is the threat of complete ruination of one's bloodline, and hence one's legacy. The fact that it is Quentin who suggests such an interpretation of events may mean that Quentin recognizes the parallels between the story of the Sutpen children and his own tragedy with Caddy.

I end my analysis with the conclusion that the incest theme in Quentin's narrative is a significant component of his moral code and obsession with virginity. The branch scene is testament not necessarily to Quentin's cowardice but to his gradual realization that the act of incest cannot have the power he wishes to impose on it (Zender 747). This is supported by Quentin's own words, as he confesses to his father that if Caddy had agreed to the proposition

he had never explicitly made, then "it wouldnt have done any good" (150). The theme of incest occurs in *Absalom, Absalom!* too, specifically in Quentin and Shreve's version of events as they theorize that Bon's incestuous marriage to Judith was driven by Bon's wish to avenge his father by destroying the Sutpen bloodline. Though the motivations differ significantly between the two narratives, the theme of incest is significant in both.

Conclusion

In this essay, my aim was to conduct a thorough analysis of Quentin Compson and the notions of virginity and Southern identity in two of Faulkner's novels. In my essay, Quentin's actions and system of morality were analyzed against the backdrop of the social, cultural and historical contexts of the early twentieth-century American South.

I started my analysis by discussing how the Southern cultural tradition glorified women's virginity, and how that context relates to Quentin Compson's character and his obsessions with his sister's sexual innocence. Far from being merely a physical category, virginity is interpreted as a social category and a metaphysical merit. I support this interpretation of the concept of virginity with sources that discuss the social role of virginity in the Old South.

In my next chapter, I began my discussion of the novels and analyzed how the notion of virginity is defined for Quentin by his father, by himself, and by a wider cultural context that we see represented in both novels. I argued that these definitions further complicate Quentin's dilemma, as both his view of women as emblems of purity, and his father's pessimistic ideas fail to supply Quentin with everlasting, stable moral values. I discuss some early signs and manifestations of this gradual failure, such as the episode in *The Sound and the Fury* when Quentin remembers the story about his broken leg, before moving on to discussing the peak of his crisis.

I dedicated the majority of the following chapter to an analysis of the episode in *The Sound and the Fury* where Quentin most explicitly addresses his own paradoxical attitude to sexuality, women, and the value of virginity. I conclude that due to the unstable, indefinite values Quentin attempts to shape into solid moral foundations, as these values inevitably come crashing down, so does his perception of his own identity.

Lastly, in my final chapter I discussed the theme of incest in *The Sound and the Fury* through the analysis of the branch scene between Quentin and Caddy. I argued that Quentin's inability to carry out his proposition of murder/incest proves that his character experiences life on the level of abstractions and not on the level of practical action. In a world without stable

moral foundations to hold on to, Quentin falls victim to his own idealism and the second-hand tragedy he had inherited, but shall never pass on.

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