

The Destruction of Southern Patriarchal Values in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury

Mađerek, Petra

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2015

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:329789>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-08-18**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Preddiplomski studij Engleskog jezika i književnosti i pedagogije

Petra Mađerek

**The Destruction of Traditional Southern Values in William Faulkner's *The Sound and
the Fury***

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2015.

CONTENTS

Abstract

Introduction

- 1. The Context of the Novel**
 - 1.1. Historical Context**
 - 1.2. The Great Depression: Inevitability and Damage of Modernization**
- 2. The Compsons: Decay of the Southern Family Image**
- 3. Decay of the Southern Male Ideal: The Degradation of the Southern Gentleman**
 - 3.1. Quentin Compson: the Lost Cause and the Decay of the Cavalier Myth**
 - 3.2. Jason Compson: Misogyny at Its Best**
- 4. Decay of the Southern Female Ideals: the Southern Belle, the Southern Mother**
 - 4.1. Caddy Compson: a Fallen Southern Belle**
 - 4.2. Caroline Compson: Mother's Womb as a Dungeon**
- 5. Dilsey – the Southern Mammy: Hope for the Glorious South**

Conclusion

Works Cited

Abstract

The Sound and the Fury is one of the most complex novels of William Faulkner and of Southern literature in general. The themes of the novel are numerous, yet the theme this BA paper is focused on the most is the death and destruction of the traditional South and its ideals. The destruction will be shown through the analysis of the novel's main characters' tragic fates. The concluding chapter of the paper brings a note of optimism for the survival of the traditional Southern ideals.

Keywords: Southern literature, decay of the South, Southern ideals and values, *the Sound and the Fury*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explain the decay of the South through the analysis of the main male and female characters in William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*. In the first chapter a brief overview of the historical and socio-economical context of the novel will be given to better understand their influence on the novel. A brief explanation of the decay of the Southern family will be given through the analysis of the Compson family. In the next part of the paper the main male characters will be described and psychologically analyzed with a purpose to show the decay of the Southern male ideals. The next part of the paper offers the explanation and analysis of the main female characters to show the decay of Southern female ideals. The final chapter of the paper brings the description and analysis of the black servant Dilsey Gibson whose character embodies hope for the salvation of Southern values and ideals.

1. The Context of the Novel

To better understand the core of a novel, the context in which the novel was written has to be elaborated at the beginning, especially the context of such a complex novel like *The Sound and the Fury*. The context plays an important role in the creation of a novel, especially Faulkner's novels as they are the products of his habitation in the Southern society. They can be regarded as testaments of the Southern history and the socio-economic circumstances that shaped the Southern identity and produced a viewpoint of the South as a separate nation of the United States constantly in opposition to the North. "So, the South became ideologically as well as economically and socially more and more divergent from North that was at once eliminating slavery and industrializing" (Boles 220).

1.1. Historical Context

According to historical sources, the major event around which the history of the South revolves is the Civil War. The Civil War divides the history of the South in two parts. The first is the prewar or the so-called antebellum South of slavery, plantation life and rigid social and moral norms. "Slavery was the defining feature of the region and its people: 'Slavery was instituted,' wrote Phillips in 1939, 'not merely to provide control of labor but also as a system of racial adjustment and social order'" (qtd. in Boles 236). The Civil War, which caused tremendous upheaval in the Southern society, followed. The end of the Civil War marked the beginning of the postwar or the so-called post-bellum South. This was the time when the South found itself in ruins looking for its true identity and social order, torn between the period of the Old South when slavery and plantation presented the core of the society and the period of modernism where the main focus was on industrialization and urbanization which were imposed on the rest of the United States by the North. Faulkner was brought up almost thirty years after the War but even then the ideology of antebellum society where racism was

a dominant construct was still very much alive. It came in the form of the so-called Jim Crow laws. “Jim Crow — a system of laws and custom that took its name from an antebellum minstrel song-and-dance — rigidly separated blacks and whites and dominated virtually all aspects of southern life” (Boles 336). This construct suppressed freedom and basic human rights of the African American folk. “The Southern aristocrats started to fear that poor whites and blacks would create an alliance against their interests and thus passed a series of ‘Jim Crow’ laws to ensure that their privilege would remain untouched” (Gros 35). The post-war South was still clinging to the ideal of white supremacy. This comes to show how resistant to change the South was; even after they were shown by the military defeat that a society in which slavery and racism were the main ideologies could not survive the coming of modernism. “The defeated salvaged their pride by defensively clinging to an ashen past. Even before the Civil War defensiveness pervaded Southern society and its cult of honor” (Dobbs 386-387).

Faulkner may have grown up long after the end of the War, but the War was still going on metaphorically in the heads of the people who exuberantly tried to restore the South to its glorious prewar self while opposing to the modernization imposed by the North. That way the South found itself stuck between the glorious past and the modernistic present. “The archaic values of the ‘Old South’ were irreconcilable with the times of drastic change” (Obenauer 2). The mind of the South, as well as its people, was dichotomized. One part wanted to cast off the chains of the past and to be reborn in the new era. These people were called the Progressivists. Others glorified the South and wanted to return to its prewar state and revive the plantation life and the slavery system. These were the traditionalists. “While the movement toward Modernism was threatening to dehumanize the Modern man, Faulkner considered resistance to change as equally damaging” (Johnson 3). So, Faulkner lived in a torn region which was trapped in an eternal quest for its identity. The novel takes place in the

year 1928 long after the War. As already mentioned, the War was still going on in the minds of the people. The main characters in this novel, the Compson family, may live in a post-War period but they are still looking back to the glorious past when they were one of the most prominent families in Jefferson, Mississippi. They still hold “slaves” who are more presented as free willing family helpers than forced servants. In this way the Compsons are the representatives of the Old South in the modern post-First World War period.

The First World War was also an event that greatly influenced the States. After the First World War, the whole America was in a state of disillusionment and people found themselves in a crisis of morals and identity. They were torn between the prewar ideals and morals, which died and vanished into thin air, and the chaos of modern world. It was very difficult, especially for the South which prided itself on the glorious past, to adapt to new circumstances of the post-First World War society. The South was simultaneously living in the post-Civil War and the post-First World War era. The South showed aversion to everything that seemed to corrupt the values of the Old South, to everything that was new and modern. This pride and resistance to change was the South's tragic flaw that sentenced it to an everlasting decay. Therefore, the Compsons symbolize the South that tries to live in the present through its past. They symbolize the South obsessed with the past, the past they try to impose on the present but fail miserably. Faulkner offers us a peek at what happens when you are trying to live by the mores and codes of the past world that has been long forgotten. The Compsons use the morals and ideals of the Old South to cope with the present, yet these ideals are obsolete and useless in the present. “The Compson family represents both aspects of the effects of Modernism: assimilation into the Modern ethos and the unwillingness to let go of the dying Southern traditions” (Johnson 4). The obsession and the attempt to impose past values and ideals on the present times lead to the corruption and decay of those same ideals, values and myths.

1.2. The Great Depression: Inevitability and Damage of Modernization

The event that immensely influenced the novel's popularity and reception was the Great Depression of 1929 which coincides with the publication of *The Sound and the Fury*. This means that the novel was published when the whole population of the United States struggled for survival. Not only was the novel published in the period of material poverty but it was also complex and written in a modernistic style which led to its bad reception and unpopularity. However, "the impressionistic and technically difficult *The Sound and the Fury* was an immediate critical success. 'A great book,' Faulkner's friend Lyle Saxon called it in a *New York Herald Tribune* review" (Fargnoli, Golay and Hamblin 10). "Faulkner himself referred to it as his 'best failure' and the one that he loved 'the most'" (qtd. in Fargnoli, Golay and Hamblin 280).

"The Great Depression . . . devastated the American South more than any other region during the 1930s" (Wilson and Ferris 622). The farmers lost their farms which, for some, were the main source of income and fed whole families. The South, especially during the Great Depression, faced the dilemma of traditional ways and modernization. They had to abolish slavery and the rural lifestyle and follow in the footsteps of the North or they could keep on living according to the mores of the Old South and decay and decline further. In the novel, this dilemma is illustrated when the Compsons sell the pasture of their imbecile son Benjy to pay their eldest son Quentin's Harvard tuition: "We have sold Benjy's pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard" (Faulkner 79). This action symbolizes the attempt of the South to become modern and Northern but at the same time to keep its noble past. Quentin, however, commits suicide and proves that selling the pasture was all in vain and so was the attempt of the South to become modern because it was too proud and laid too much emphasis on reliving the past, even in the new postwar world.

2. The Compsons: Decay of the Southern Family Image

Sociologically, a family represents the core of an individual's life as well as of a society altogether. Some societies pride themselves upon the strength of family bonds and their beneficence for the strength of the society. When the South is taken into account, one of the main social phenomena and actually the essence of the Southern society is family. In the antebellum South, family was considered to be a sacred social domain from which the identity and the worth of the individual originated. "As a possible way to insulate against looming cultural forces while establishing a visible presentation of unity, the family takes on a key significance for creating and maintaining identity through blood" (Phillips 3). Family, especially in the period after the War, was a place of comfort and understanding. With the coming of modernism, all values started to deteriorate even the ones connected to family as a center of an individual's and society's life. The Southern family in particular started becoming more of a myth than a reality-based construct. "The local colorists had painted a broad, idealized, highly unrealistic vision of southern families" (Wilson and Ferris 1105). "Richard King's Southern family romance phenomenon influenced the creation of the main myth about a Southern family" (Wilson and Ferris 1104). "This nostalgic, glorified, and cozy conceptualization of the family is too often a sad distortion of domestic reality" (Storhoff 465). The family which represented the core of Southern society became a myth.

"In Faulkner's 'family-centered literature' we discover the ravages of alcoholism and its effects on the family, miserable marriages that lead to spousal abuse, threats of sibling incest and sibling violence, violence against infants and children" (qtd. in Storhoff 465). "On a macro level, family values and individual actions act as a guide towards the overarching mores of the Old South. The members of each family, the Compsons . . . each contribute a different voice to Faulkner's world and collectively portray the South as a dystopian society

in direct contrast to its supposed Edenic culture” (Phillips 6). All the families in Faulkner's novels, especially the Compsons, represent a “dysfunctional lot indeed.” To understand the dysfunction of family as a whole one must first try to understand every individual member of family because “every important family member plays a part in the dysfunction of the dysfunctional member” (Storhoff 470).

One of Richard King's myths was, that “at the center of the family romance, in its patriarchal expression, was the father” (34). “In *The Sound and the Fury* the Compson family is organized around the alcoholism of Mr. Compson who stanches the family's emotional bleeding with his ever-constant ‘hushing,’ his self-deceptive embrace of stoicism and his refusal to acknowledge the emotions of his children” (Sorhoff 470).

It can be seen that when the core of the family is corrupt all other members slowly start to follow and this results in the decay and downfall of the whole family which alludes to the downfall of the proud, patriarchal yet dysfunctional Old South. The Compsons are completely ruined, but there is another family in the novel which represents a strong contrast to the lunacy of the Compsons and shows how a functional family looks like. This family “are the Gibsons – practical, ‘common-sense variety’ blacks whose individual and collective voices create an eloquent contrast to the white world and form, on a level of emotion and reason, a more viable approach to life” (Phillips 20). Through this race and family contrast Faulkner ironizes the white supremacy and tries to show how hypocritical the white Southern family actually is.

3. Decay of the Southern Male Ideal: The Degradation of the Southern Gentleman

One of the most prominent and mythical male ideals of the South is the Southern gentleman. The source from which the ideal originated is “the English gentleman described in contemporary prescriptive literature” (Gros 29). “The gentleman’s dress and manners reflected his civility and refinement; his classical education, his love for literature signified his rightful position of authority over those around him; above all, he was the picture of self-control and moderation” (Gros 29). There was also this mythic notion that the gentleman had to be the sacred protector of women. He was supposed to protect them not from other men, but from the woman herself and other women. As Quentin says: “father and I protect women from one another from themselves our women” (Faulkner 80). Singal describes the Southern gentleman as “tolerant, kindly, broadminded, non-puritan, moderate, hospitable, and courteous ... a totally integrated personality, he is also supremely gregarious and sees himself as rightly into an organic familial and social order that has a sense of purpose and unity” (qtd. in Gros 29). However, “this image of the gentleman was greatly romanticized and was highly incongruent with the reality of the quintessential Southern man” (Gros 30). Cash’s view of the Southern gentleman greatly differs from Singal’s description as he claims that the qualities connected to a traditional Southern man were not community-oriented but self-oriented. He asserts that the Southern gentleman had numerous qualities among which were aggression and establishment of autonomy. Cash describes him as being individualistic, independent and resentful of authority. “Most importantly, as Cash emphasizes, ‘the Southern man —did not (typically speaking) think; he felt’” (qtd. in Gros 31). Similarly, Wyatt-Brown argues that the masculinity of the Southern gentleman was driven by emotion rather than intellect. In addition, “Southerners displayed their valor through vengeance, exalted individual will, duels, and lynching” (Gros 32). This brief description of the Southern gentleman shows that his

degradation can be explained in terms of the dichotomy between the rational, moderate, self-controlled man and one controlled by emotions, individual will and vengeance.

The decay of the Southern gentleman myth is in the novel described in the following way: “Father said it used to be a gentleman was known by his books; nowadays he is known by the ones he has not returned” (Faulkner 67). The degradation of the Southern gentleman was also catalyzed by the First World War after which masculinity in general became even more endangered and fell into a sort of moral crisis which again caused an ideal to become a romanticized myth. Yet, that myth was still present in the postwar world because the aristocratic culture of the Old South where men still pursued honor even though they lacked the gentility of the forefathers still persisted in the South. This obsolete and decayed myth was in part replaced by the industrious and businesslike male individual of the victorious North. As a consequence, the Southern male identity found itself in an even bigger crisis because it was half-South and half-North again, torn between the two regions of the United States. The degeneration of the Southern gentleman will be further elaborated through the analysis of Quentin and Jason Compson.

3.1. Quentin Compson: the Lost Cause and the Decay of the Cavalier Myth

“A man is the sum of his misfortunes” – Jason Compson, Sr.

In order to understand one of the most complex characters in Faulkner's fiction, we have to look at the Southern myths that took part in the formation of his character as well as in his downfall. These are the Southern Cavalier myth and the Lost Cause myth. According to literature and Southern culture and history, the cavalier and the gentleman are interchangeable terms. The only difference between the two is that the cavalier ideal has “more specific geographical and genealogical associations . . . The Southern gentleman is a character type

with broader social and geographical applications” (Flora, MacKethan and Taylor 292). The early Cavalier is described as “courtly, wealthy, yet nonmaterialistic, brave, honorable and gentle . . . He also had developed martial skills which were mostly prominent during the War and his conduct was most frequently described as knightly — which symbolized his courageous devotion to the cause” (Wilson and Ferris 1131). The prime example of the Confederate Cavalier in Southern history was General Robert Lee. However, in the post-First World War period the Cavalier myth was becoming fragmented, torn between the wealth and glamour he lived in and his adversity towards the materialistic society of the North. His identity was now torn between the Old South and the new values. “Nevertheless, the Cavalier myth served as both an inspiration for those who wanted to push on into the New South and as a consolation for those who embraced the Old South as an unattainable Golden Age” (Wilson and Ferris 1131). According to the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, “the Cavalier myth functioned as a prominent aspect of the larger mythic worlds of the plantation and the Lost Cause” (Wilson and Ferris 1131).

The Lost Cause was popularized in the literature of the Southern Confederacy and “represented the Southern efforts to come to terms with the defeat and the new American nation which rose from ashes of war” (Dobbs 367). The Lost Cause glorified the sacrifices of the war and the antebellum social manners. This is the main but not the only definition of the Lost Cause myth. There are numerous definitions that try to explain what the Lost Cause was really about. “The term became identified with the efforts to enshrine the memory of the Civil War” (Wilson and Ferris 1134). There were a lot of events connected to these efforts such as the meeting of different groups and associations including The Daughters or The Sons of Confederacy who held reunions and placed monuments all over the Southern region so that the glory of the war could never be forgotten. Others thought of the Lost Cause as an overly glorified myth and “a diversion from the real issues — another trick by which the Democratic

establishment maintained its power” (Wilson and Ferris 1134). “Some historians saw the Lost Cause as a kind of civil religion that helped the unification of the Southern society and provided people with a sense of having a special mission in this world” (Wilson and Ferris 1134). This sense of a special mission set the South further apart from the North. The Southerners were proud of their own defeat which made them seem more victorious than the North. The mentioned myths are ironized and distorted in *The Sound and the Fury* and shown as the cause of Quentin's failure as a Southern gentleman.

Quentin is the eldest son of the Compson family. There are many obsessions that rule his life, yet the two most prominent are the obsession with reliving the past which presents the distortion of the Lost Cause myth and the obsessively humiliating efforts of defending his sister Caddy's virginity. The Compson family is powerfully influenced by both the Cavalier and Victorian ideals which collide in Quentin's personality. The mix of the glorification and the denial of Southern Cavalier values reflected in his father's nihilistic cynicism confuse Quentin and consequently lead to his inability to create an identity and a mind of his own. He is greatly influenced by his father which is illustrated by his constant repetition of the phrase “Father said.” This makes it seem that his mind is not his own; it is possessed by the ghosts of his ancestors who lived in the glorious past. He is thus obsessed with reliving the past.

The decay of the Southern gentleman myth is also reflected in Quentin's unhealthy obsession with the defending of the female purity and honor represented by his absurd efforts at defending his sister's virginity which is, as he believes, endangered by her promiscuity. There are several attempts at doing so. The first one is when he tries to fight Dalton Ames, Caddy's lover: “I hit him I was still trying to hit him long after he held my wrists . . . I could hear my blood and I could see the sky again” (Faulkner 136). He is miserably humiliated when he fails. Dobbs claims that by “dueling Quentin was trying to defend not only his sister's purity but his manhood – a quality which lay at the heart of Southern social anxiety in

the post-war period” (378). “In duels and fistfights, Quentin attempts to act out Southern manhood to defend his family's honor, and his own sexual honor. His opponents repulse his bluster, pushing his anger into the fantasy realm, illuminating his failure as a Lost Cause ‘man’” (Dobbs 379). Another manifestation of his efforts is his false confession of incest: “*I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames*” (Faulkner 66). He has the perverted notion of the incestuous relationship as the purifying force rather than a vile and disgraceful act as it is considered by traditional society. He believes that the incest will isolate him and Caddy from society to a place where they would be all alone so he can protect her purity: “*If it could just be a hell beyond that: a clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me the only me then the two of us amid the pointing and horror beyond the clean flame*” (Faulkner 98). He fails at that too. He then tries to impose the old ideals and values in an “attempt to shame Caddy, by making her realize her transgressions against the family's honor” (Dobbs 375). Yet, Caddy does what she wants and he has no influence on her whatsoever which renders him hopeless and helpless.

The reasons for the failure of Quentin's notions of manhood and the old Southern ideals are manifold. “Quentin's attitude towards the antebellum glories and war-time tragedy allowed him to live in the past” (Dobbs 380). Yet, his father's cynical rejection of the past wreaked havoc with his personality. This cynical rejection actually represents the modern times in which the norms and values of the antebellum South are mocked and are becoming obsolete and futile. “Quentin came to love ‘some concept of Compson honor’ contingent on his sister's virginity, but he ‘loved death above all’” (qtd. in Dobbs 390). “Pride in a code and shame at his inability to live up to the mythic past fill his mind with delusion and his lungs with water” (Dobbs 389). In a nutshell, Quentin dealt with his insecurities by clinging to and following the moral code of the Lost Cause and harboring “the nostalgia for the antebellum life which played a great role in his social undoing” (Dobbs 376). “Quentin's insecurities over

his sister's sexuality, his father's cynical philosophy and his inability to impose the patriarchal code of the long gone Old South on a changing world resulted in his infection with a social disease” (Dobbs 390). Quentin's character is one of the most dreadful illustrations of the consequences of the attempt of living in the present by following the code of an ashen past. “Quentin is the mirror for old-fashioned norms and values of the ‘Old South’” (Obenauer 3). Nothing good comes out of that only death and decay of an individual and of a society in general.

3.2. Jason Compson: Misogyny at Its Best

“once a bitch always a bitch” – Jason Compson Jr.

Another lost son of the Compson family is Jason Jr. Just like his older brother Quentin, Jason has his own absurd ways of dealing with his insecure masculinity, a quality epitomized by the Old South. As already mentioned, a Southern gentleman always protected and praised the lady by putting her on a pedestal. “Southern men have toasted and celebrated Southern womanhood since the South began to think of itself as a region” (Wilson and Ferris 1528). Jason instead treats women quite the opposite. Jason is a misogynist whose malign obsession with women stems from his hatred towards his sister and niece and causes his fall from grace. More than a simple obsession, the hatred he feels toward his niece becomes part of the feelings he feels toward every woman. Through the hatred of individual persons, Jason thus generalizes his hatred towards the whole female sex. This obsession causes him to lose grip on his personality and actually become torn between the two “opposing hallmarks of misogyny—idealization and demonization” (Gros 151). He tries to build his manhood on subduing and insulting women. “His sense of self-worth as a man is actually built on insulting women” (Gros 151). He hates all the women because the women in his life ruined it by being

what they are – simply women. “He blames his mother for not being able to marry until she dies, Caddy’s infidelity results in his lost job and future prospects, and Miss Quentin tarnishes his good name throughout Yoknapatawpha County” (Phillips 15). The only female figure he considers to be honorable, and what an irony that is, is the prostitute he is seeing, Lorraine whom he keeps in his control by not telling her when he is coming to visit her. His hatred of women as an establishment of manhood thus becomes an absurd illusion. On the one hand, he harbors the deepest hatred for women who according to him “dress like they were trying to make every man passed on the street want to reach out and clap his hand on it” (Faulkner 197). On the other, he idealizes a prostitute calling her a more honorable woman than the good and honest white women of his society: “I’d like to see the good, church-going woman that’s half as square as Lorraine, whore or no whore” (Faulkner 209). “Jason is a true hypocrite—another of these monomaniacs in *The Sound and the Fury*—who . . . is fully aware of doubleness, yet asserts the moral superiority of his vision, and, in spite of a complete departure from it himself, attempts imposing it upon the others” (Gros 152). Jason tries to fight against his masculine insecurity through submission and dismissiveness towards women but in the end no matter how much he tries to get over it the sole embodiment of his misogyny, his niece Quentin, emasculates him which makes him a mockery of the whole town. This emasculation in turn leads to even harsher misogyny and need for dominance. “Specifically, when robbed by Miss Quentin, his misogyny is stripped down to its fundamental roots to his more basic desire for dominance” (Phillips 15). The mentioned qualities of bitterness and misogyny cause his fall from the ideal of the Southern gentleman as an integrated personality and as a chivalrous defender of womanhood. “Jason, much like the neurotic Quentin, cannot escape from his self-made prison” (Gros 154). Thus, Jason presents the prime example of a fallen Southern gentleman.

4. Decay of the Southern Female Ideals: the Southern Belle, the Southern Mother

As afore-mentioned, in the Old South a woman was worshiped almost like a deity. There was nothing more sacred than the purity and love of a Southern woman. Especially during the war, they were considered to be the saviors and comforters of the fallen Confederate soldiers. “Southern women in their loyalty, purity, and submissiveness proved essential to cushioning the shock of defeat for their men” (Dobbs 371). The Southern woman had many roles that came with certain duties. “As a wife, she was a ‘queen of the home’; as a mother, she was devotion and self-denial personified. The historian Anne Firor Scott aptly says that for this model of Southern femininity ‘life was one long act of devotion’” (qtd. in Wilson and Ferris 1521). “As men were the body, so the women were the soul of the Old South” (Roberts 1). With the coming of modern times, morals as well as gender roles were starting to change. Women demanded more freedom and more education, especially in the South. “Public school systems were established in the region and as students, black and white females received the benefits—uneven though they were—of literacy ... For many Southern women the most dramatic break with antebellum traditions was their entry into public life” (Wilson and Ferris 1523). Through gaining more freedom, women gained more power and opportunities for self-improvement. These changes made the traditional female ideals obsolete. The two most prominent female stereotypes in the South were the Southern belle and the Southern mother both of whom are ironized and mocked in *The Sound and the Fury* to show their decay and the destruction of female ideals by the imposed morals and gender roles of the Southern society.

The Southern belle is “a privileged white girl at the glamorous and exciting period between being a daughter and becoming a wife” (Wilson and Ferris 1527). Once she marries, she becomes a lady, “and a lady she will remain until she dies . . . Her roles in society change: satisfying her husband, raising his children, meeting the demands of the family's

social position, and sustaining the ideal of the South” (Wilson and Ferris 1527). She is the heroine of the Old South and an epitome of female purity. “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” (Roberts 102). Yet, this purity is desecrated by the filth of modern times and, occasionally, violent male domination.

The Southern mother is the key stereotype of the Old South. She, the same as the belle, is the symbol of purity be it racial or sexual. “Yet, she is paradoxically asexual for all that she bears children” (Roberts 186). The most defining features of the mother are her physical body and the biological as well as the emotional bond she has with her children. She is the fulfillment of the role of the belle because of her ability to give birth and produce a crop. “She is singular, the source of moral instruction, grace, goodness, represented by the classical body on the pedestal” (Roberts 187).

4.1. Caddy Compson: a Fallen Southern Belle

“When they touched me, I died” – Caddy Compson

Caddy Compson is the central character around which all the narratives in Faulkner's novel revolve. “Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* as the female descendant of a declined aristocratic family is burdened with the myth of the Southern lady” (Jie 1). Although Caddy is the central character in the novel, Faulkner lets other family members define her and criticize or obsess over her fall from grace because ““Caddie was ... too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on,’ and that ‘it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes’” (qtd. in Jie 2).

Caddy has certain qualities of a belle. She is tender and caring to her brothers Benjy and Quentin for whom she represents the mother figure they always lacked. She is strong and independent. She cares and stands up for others so much, yet she is “shy when her fate is in

focus because she does not want to have her feelings and emotions out in the public eye and so tries to keep her position in society” (Klančar 53). Unfortunately, she fails, mainly for trying to break free from the conventions and social roles imposed by the Southern society and her family, mainly her mother. “She seeks many sexual relationships in her adolescence, which is frowned upon by the society and her family too” (Klančar 53). Her defiance in accepting the conventional norms of the Southern society upsets all the family members. Especially interesting is her mother's theatrical reaction to her kissing a boy described by Jason: “like that time when she [mother] happened to see one of them kissing Caddy and all next day she went around the house in a black dress and veil and even Father couldn't get her to say a word except crying and saying how her little daughter was dead” (Faulkner 195). In the South and according to the Compsons, “female ‘honor,’ that is, chastity is a ‘verifier of family status’. . . Caddy is a daughter of the aristocratic family and an emblem to their status and an economic asset” (Roberts 112). All of this is called into question when Caddy engages in promiscuous sexual relationships just to break free from the chains of her family and society. She has to pay the price for her individuality and broadmindedness. “Caddy becomes a fallen woman who is not allowed to visit her parental home and the very mention of her name is forbidden by her mother” (Klančar 54). She is also not allowed to see, let alone raise, her daughter.

Caddy is a victim of the imposition of the rules of patriarchal Southern society and her family. “She is a loser in her rebellion against male convention” (Klančar 54). In the end, she loses her strength and independence doing nothing about it. “Caddy's weakness is shown in her passive approval of and agreement with the pre-arranged marriage and reaches its highest point when she gives up her right as a mother, believing she is not good enough to raise her own daughter” (Klančar 54). She is a fallen belle and a fallen lady of the South who tried to express her feminine personality in a male-dominated South. “The patriarchal Southern

society and its idolizing the perfect Southern belle did much damage to these women who could not meet all the expectations and failed to act out their role as a perfect belle” (Klančar 57). In the image of Caddy, Faulkner tries to show the damage that an overly patriarchal society can do to women and how this actually leads to the decay and destruction of traditional ideals not just the Southern ones but the ideals of a society.

4.2. Caroline Compson: Mother's Womb as a Dungeon

“If I’d just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother” – Quentin Compson

The character through which Faulkner illustrates the most horrid decay of Southern ideals is Caroline Compson, the mother. The Southern mother and mother in general are supposed to be a crucial family member. “Mothers are meant to be sacred servants” (Weinstein 71). In this novel, the mother is everything but sacred and caring, a true disgrace for all mothers. She is trapped in her decay and drags the whole family into it. Weinstein claims that Caroline Compson is “a socially constructed figure” (73). Her life is divided in two periods: the premarital period and the post marital period. In the latter she hides from her failure as a wife, a mother and consequently a woman. Weinstein claims that

these are the only roles Mrs. Compson can play—premarital coquetry or post maternal grief. Her abandonment of her children emerges here as saturated in the rituals and assumptions of her own virginal past. Between her childless adolescence and her child-complicated middle age no other viable script has become available to her. (68)

She appears to have no life story or no positive memories after she marries Jason Compson Sr. and after they consume the marriage. “The picture of Mrs. Compson that emerges is of a woman whose life ceased to be narratable after her entry into marriage and its sexual

consequences” (Weinstein 69). It is like everything she believed in as a young girl has gone and she gives into the one-dimensional and reputation-obsessed life which serves as a compensation for her lost status as a Bascomb. After she delivered her children, she herself begins “acting like a child exacting from her children the sustenance she should be offering them” (Weinstein 69). She feels trapped in a life with the Compsons. She sees all of her physically or psychologically deformed children as a curse except for Jason Jr. because he is more on the Bascomb side. It can be seen that “her feelings and emotions are strictly limited to one side of the family, namely the Bascombs, whereas the Compsons do not deserve her time” (Klančar 53). She equates family with blood and reputation.

As already mentioned, she only cares for the Basomb side of which she is very proud. “Her brother Maury seems to serve as her way of remaining a Bascomb, of refusing to consummate her entry into Compsonhood” (Weinstein 69). And that is also the reason she clings to Jason Jr. so tightly: “You [Jason] are my only hope she [Caroline] says Every night I thank God for you . . . Thank God if he had to be taken too, it is you left me and not Quentin” (Faulkner 170). Caroline's relation to her brother irresistibly reminds us of Quentin and Caddy's vaguely incestuous relation.

Caroline's main problem seems to be the binary environment in which she was brought up where she was taught that “there is no halfway ground that a woman is either a lady or not” (qtd. in Weinstein 69). That kind of nurture completely damages her notion of purity. After her virginity is taken she feels like she has lost herself together with it. She sees sex as a vile and degrading act of violation of a woman's dignity and sexual purity. That is the reason she acts so dramatically when Caddy kisses a boy and even worse, when she loses her virginity.

This brief analysis shows that Caroline, the same as her daughter, symbolizes the decay of Southern female ideals. She also becomes the victim of the social roles and the

environment in which she was brought up. Weinstein, thus, describes her downfall as a mother and of mothers in Faulkner's novels in general: “‘Selfless, unwavering care and concern’: this is exactly what these mothers lack. It is also what they are posited by the culture as *supposed to possess*, and what they are excoriated for not possessing” (70-71). In addition, Weinstein, too, argues that Caroline,

deformed by her social training—training shaped by class and race to the requirements of virginity—abandons her own flesh and blood upon the loss of that virginity. She has outlived her image of herself. Simultaneously rushing forward to death and backward to childhood, she repeats herself and takes to black. (70)

In this sense Caroline Compson represents the decay of Southern ladyhood and motherhood which is caused by the imposition of social roles on young girls in their fragile age which damages their notion of ladyhood and motherhood.

5. Dilsey- the Southern Mammy: Hope for the Glorious South

“I seed d beginning and I seed d ending” – Dilsey Gibson

One of the most prominent Old South character types that persisted in the New South is the Mammy. “The ‘mammy’ is a stereotype derived from history and popular culture” (Wilson and Ferris 1135). She is the antithesis to the Confederate white woman. While the white women are described as delicate beings, Donald Bogle portrays the mammy as a “‘desexed, overweight, dowdy, dark black woman’” (qtd. in Wilson and Ferris 1135). “Where the classical body in the form of a white lady ‘keeps its distance’ . . . the Mammy's body is loudly immediate” (Roberts 42). The body of a white woman serves as a monument, a statue to be worshipped and intact. In contrast, “all the functions of mammy are magnificently physical” (Roberts 42). Roberts describes the physical features of a Mammy in the following way: “The exaggerated breasts of the Mammy provide milk; she prepares food, bathes, comforts, and instructs the white child-all activities of Southern social order absolved its white ladies of just as it absolved them of sexuality” (42). So, all the functions of which white ladies are deprived of fall onto the mammy. It is also important to mention that the figure of the Mammy, the same as the Cavalier, serves as a bridge between the Old and the New South “and the figure of the Mammy is a reminder both of Arcadian antebellum days and the guilt of slavery. . . the embodied oxymoron of the Southern attitude to blacks” (Roberts 43). She is not just a physical figure but also “a symbol of self-sacrificial motherhood, celebrated for denying not only her gender but her race” (Roberts 41). The Mammy is a dominant symbol of both sacrifice and, what is more important, endurance. She is all that the white ladies are not.

One of the most famous Mammy characters in Faulkner's fiction is Dilsey Gibson. She is the black servant of the Compson family. She represents all the qualities of a true mother: love, caring, patience, endurance, selflessness. “The bond between the Mammy and the

children she looked after is something Faulkner tries to honor and examine in fiction throughout his career” (Roberts 49). Dilsey is considered to be the rock, the moral center of *The Sound and the Fury*. The notion of a Mammy being a large, overweight woman is here parodied because Dilsey is weak and thin, yet her spirit is strong. She is very religious even to a fault. Her religion carries with it a strong redemptive force. “The stereotyped religiosity of the old-time mammy becomes something tragic (because of its inability to redeem the family, especially Caddy and Quentin) in Faulkner's coinage of the figure for 1928” (Roberts 58).

Further deconstruction of the Mammy myth occurs in relation to the wide-known fact that in the period of slavery slaves were considered to be “lost children” who needed guidance and care from the supreme white men. They had also to behave like children – not questioning anything, having no freedom, etc. They were regarded as tame on the one hand and dangerous on the other if not tamed. Faulkner ironizes this relationship because in the novel Dilsey, the black servant, serves as a mother figure to her white family who are all her children, even Caroline Compson. As a black servant, Dilsey has the central role in a white family. “Faulkner attempts to indict white Southern society for its hypocrisy by showing the black mother as the ‘authentic’ mother of the black and white southern family” (Roberts 42). This hypocrisy of the Southern society is one of the main causes of its moral and social decay in general. “Dilsey is the Mammy reactivated in the moral darkness of the New South: a critique both of the New South and of the old Mammy” (Roberts 58). In conclusion, she does represent the decay of the Southern society, but as the enduring black mother she also represents a hope for the South's former glory and greatness.

Conclusion

The Sound and the Fury was greatly influenced by the period in which it was written and even more by the period in which Faulkner grew up. It was a time of social injustice and violence, especially in the Southern region of the United States. It was a region greatly defined by the socially imposed notions of manhood and womanhood which became meaningless in the modern times. This consequently led to the decay of the South and its traditional male and female ideals. The traditional Southern family was deconstructed the most, which *The Sound and the Fury* brilliantly portrays. The novel shows the decay of the family which represented the core of the Southern society. With the decay of the social core comes the decay of the society as a whole.

Faulkner also brilliantly portrays the individual tragedies of the family members and the roles that they play in the downfall of the family altogether. The main reasons for the decay of the traditional South are the attempts to live according to the romanticized Southern ideals in the time and space in which they are becoming obsolete and useless and the resistance to let go of these distorted ideals. The final chapter, however, gives an optimistic view for the survival of the traditional South in the modern world; this optimism is embodied in the selfless endurance and faith of the Mammy and her visceral connection with nature and time.

Works Cited

- Boles, John B. *A Companion to the American South*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- Dobbs, Ricky Floyd. "Case Study in Social Neurosis: Quentin Compson and the Lost Cause." *Papers on Language and Literature* 33.4 (1997): 366-391.
- Fargnoli, A. Nicholas, Michael Golay and Robert W. Hamblin. *Critical Companion to William Faulkner: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008.
- Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. London: Random House, 1995.
- Flora, Joseph M., Lucinda H. MacKethan and Todd W. Taylor. *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001.
- Gros, Emmeline. *The Southern Gentleman and the Idea of Masculinity: Figures and Aspects of the Southern Beau in the Literary Tradition of the American South*. Diss., Georgia State University, 2010. http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_diss/64.
- Jie, Tao. "Repressed Voices: Faulkner's Three Female Characters." *The Faulkner Journal of Japan* 2 (2000). 1 June 2015. <http://www.faulknerjapan.com/journal/No2/TAO.htm>.
- Johnson, Nathan. "No More a Walking Shadow: William Faulkner and the Fight Against Modernism." Bryan College, 2015: 1-30. Academia.edu, 1 June 2015. http://www.academia.edu/9896302/No_More_a_Walking_Shadow_William_Faulkner_and_the_Fight_Against_Modernism.
- King, Richard H. *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980
- Obenauer, Julian. "Sound and Fury Echoes Through Time." Philipps-Universität Marburg, 2015: 1-5. academia.edu, 1 June 2015. https://www.academia.edu/8273071/Sound_and_Fury_Echoes_Through_Time.

- Phillips, Neil T. *Bad Blood: The Southern Family in the Work of William Faulkner*. Thesis. University of Massachusetts, 2011.
- Roberts, Diane. *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
- Strohoff, Gary. "Faulkner's Family Crucible: Quentin's Dilemma." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 51.3 (1998): 465-482.
- Weinstein, Philip. "'If I Could Say Mother': Construing the Unsayable About Faulknerian Maternity." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008. 67-80.
- Wilson, Charles Reagan and William Ferris. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.