

# **Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

Lucy Cook

University of Essex

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## **Abstract**

Many critics have investigated Southern social codes within William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. However, often the focus is on either race, gender or class and this can lead to a situation in which much is missed. It is the interaction of all three of these social codes that lies at the core of this text and to concentrate solely on one without equal consideration for each is to oversimplify the text and the wider social issues of the South. With this in mind, this paper strives to investigate the interaction of the Southern social codes of race, gender and class within *The Sound and the Fury* and express how these codes are inextricably linked and dependent upon one another. Moreover, this paper explores how these interconnect to inform the text while reflecting, commenting upon and maintaining a complex and often tense relationship with the wider social milieu of the Southern states of the USA. This is investigated through the character of Quentin Compson who, in many ways, represents the clash of the 'old' and 'new' South, which in turn expresses the interaction of historical class, gender and racial codes and their move into the 'new' world of the changing South. As Myra Jehlen (1976, p. 43) states, 'Faulkner...is driven to pierce...the myths which he is coming...to realize have distorted Southern reality' and it is this desire to enlighten reality through literature which is considered within this paper. This reflection and questioning of Southern social codes marks why *The Sound and the Fury* has such endurance, whilst simultaneously highlighting the importance of the axis of race, class and gender within the text.

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**Keywords:** William Faulkner, Southern social codes, USA.

**Essay**

*The Sound and the Fury*...transforms...personal anxieties into a fiction with profound cultural implications.

John Earl Bassett (1981, p.2)

History and time are of great importance to the works of William Faulkner and, as Richard Godden (1993, p.113) states, '[o]nce history can be seen as the activity of revision...the contours of the past are unfixed'. This partially explains the impact of Faulkner's style and, as Myra Jehlen (1976, p.42) states, 'Faulkner...is driven to pierce...the myths which he is coming...to realize have distorted Southern reality.' This realisation of history as myth exposes how, for Faulkner, Southern social codes maintain a knotty interaction with history. Due to the slave economy, upon which these myths were created, race, gender and class within *The Sound and the Fury* are not only entangled but dependent upon one another. Therefore, the depiction of the disintegration of the Compson family is also a questioning of the mythologised history, which places race, gender and class at its centre.

Many critics have considered *The Sound and the Fury* to have a basis in gender, race and class, but often only focus on one or two of these issues within the text. Therefore, many critics neglect the importance that each plays in the realisation of the others. For example, Jehlen's (1976, p.42) focus is on class and he states 'of course Yoknapatawphans are race conscious. But...the most important distinction...in their social structure is class'. While it is true that the subject of class is both important and often overlooked, Jehlen (1976, p.10) also suggests the relative absence of race ignores race in the text; that this is 'a white man's tale'. Although accurate, Jehlen's statement overlooks the importance that marginalisation has in the exploration of race, for it is often that which is not said that highlights the lack of voice within a text and a wider society. The decentralisation of African-American characters within *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates this

**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

lack of voice, particularly when considered in conjunction with the white character's perception of race. Jehlen overlooks the importance of the dialogue between African-American and white characters and how this contributes to the mythologizing and breaking down of Southern social codes. The same is true of gender. Godden states that 'Faulkner's plots lie in the Southern politics of race and gender' and yet the power of class codes do not register with Godden (1993, p.105) as integral. However, it is only when this triad of myth and social power are considered in conjunction that the essence of this text can be discovered. Therefore, this paper will explore Faulkner's engagement with race, gender and class within *The Sound and the Fury*, paying attention to their connection and interaction to the point of interdependence and how they form the basis for the predominant mythology of the south. Moreover, this paper will consider how Faulkner's engagement with the past is integral to these themes. Due to constraints of space, this work will focus on one section of the text, June Second 1910. This section is the narrative of Quentin Compson, the eldest child of the ill-fated Compson family. Although this section is often discussed, its complexity exemplifies the complicated interaction of the chosen themes and as such has much to offer in this exploration.

The longest and most introspective section of the text, June Second 1910, narrated by Quentin Compson, exemplifies the tragedy of the inability to relinquish the past. Quentin is embroiled in the gender, race and class codes of the South and it is his inability to move into a new southern future that leads to his demise. Due to this Quentin exemplifies the interaction of class, race, gender and history within the text. Quentin's preoccupation with class surfaces through his obsession with his sister's virginity and this is where Quentin exemplifies the interaction between gender and class. However, it is not only Quentin who interacts with the class codes of the south, Quentin's Harvard College friend, Gerald Bland, and Gerald's mother both represent new money and an unwavering belief in class hierarchy. Quentin's interaction with the Blands is revealing; he appears torn between the desire for class status and an inability to relinquish the Southern social codes, which result in his historical stasis while he is simultaneously disgusted by those same codes exposed through the behaviour of the Blands. As John Earl Bassett (1981, p. 8) states, 'Gerald is an ironic wish fulfilment. When he went off to Harvard, his mother came along' this demonstrates Quentin's desires for the past, as witnessed through Faulkner's formal choice of stream of consciousness. For example, the scenes with Mrs Bland and Gerald are often interspersed with memories of Caddy's

**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

wedding or affair with Dalton Ames and this demonstrates how the two are comparable for Quentin. Caddy is a mother figure for Quentin, as are Mrs Bland and Quentin's actual mother, and he loses all of them to rival males; Mrs Bland to Gerald, Caddy to her lovers and his mother to her selfishness and favouritism for his brother Jason. Moreover, Mrs Bland approves of Quentin, leading to his hope of a renewed mother figure, but her approval is based on her interaction with Southern class codes. She clings to the ideals of the South, which is demonstrated through her approval of Quentin because, 'I at least revealed a blundering sense of noblesse oblige by getting myself born below Mason and Dixon' (Faulkner, 1995, p.76). This statement expresses the arbitrary and accidental nature of Southern social codes as they are dependent upon fluke of birth.

However, the myth of the Southern gentleman is undermined throughout the text. For example, the ridiculousness of the Blands satirises the class codes they revere. Furthermore, Quentin's roommate Shreve states, 'god I'm glad I'm not a gentleman' (Faulkner, 1995, p.85) acting as a voice of dissension. Moreover, Mrs Bland disapproves of Shreve and yet economically he and Quentin are matched; it is the myth of 'gentile Southerners' that motivates her judgement. The presence of the Blands highlights the northern environment of Harvard and parodies the milieu in which Quentin was raised. For Quentin to be able to afford to attend Harvard the Compsons sell a pasture which belongs to his vulnerable brother Benjy. Thus, Harvard is the reason for the sale of Benjy's pasture, which emphasizes the desire for class status as rife and is a contributing factor to the dissolution of familial ties for the Compsons. The removal of Quentin from his southern environment sparks a new dialogue with his southern culture, something which is highlighted further in Faulkner's other work *Absalom, Absalom*, within which the character of Quentin Compson is reprised and plays a key role.

However, Mrs Bland's assumption of Quentin's 'gentility' is based upon his southern accent. If she had probed further she would be aware of the Compson's decline. This is revealing as Quentin's accent is not universally associated with white, upper middle-class landowners, as noted by the boys that Quentin encounters while walking in the country, 'He talks like they do in minstrel shows...you said he talks like a coloured man' (Faulkner, 1995, pp.110-1). This conflation of African-American people and the minstrel show demonstrates the segregated nature of society and the vile parody that was considered both an acceptable and accurate portrayal of African-Americans. Moreover, the idea that African-Americans speak with a southern accent highlights the

**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

migration north of emancipated slaves and the inescapable truth that the economy of the south was built on slave labour. This small comment exposes the role that the emancipation of slaves played in the disintegration of the Compson family and plantation families in general, which exposes the basis of such 'gentility' as exploitation. This demonstrates how class and race are linked within the text and how this is constructed through the lens of the past. This demonstrates how race and class are intertwined through the dependence these myths have upon a system based on racial inequality. It also evidences how an accent considered high class by the Blands results from their familiarity and acceptance of the myth of 'southern gentility' and therefore exposes its constructed nature. Moreover, Mrs Bland tells the story of 'how Gerald throws his nigger downstairs' (Faulkner, 1995, p.89), demonstrating how the Blands ape the southern myths to which they aspire and here they are exposing the southern racial code. Yet Quentin is disquieted by this exposition of his southern ideals. When transposed to a new space they start to be questioned through characters such as Quentin's room-mate Shreve, the fishing boys he meets while walking, the little Italian girl who follows him, and his interaction with her family. As Jehlen (1976, p.46) states, 'have [the Blands] debased his heritage or only exposed it?' It would be fair to state that they have done both, they have exposed the ridiculous and arbitrary nature of these codes while they have mimicked what is only the most vile and degraded parts of Southern culture.

One of the major preoccupations of Quentin's moral code is that of gender, which is entangled with class. This is expressed through the narrative time slippage between the 'present' interactions of Quentin and the Blands, and the memories of Caddy that these interactions seem to spark in Quentin's thoughts; most notably when Quentin attacks Gerald, which happens when Gerald seems to have become synonymous in Quentin's mind with Caddy's lover Dalton Ames. Quentin's obsession with Caddy's virginity exemplifies his obsession with the social codes of the south, its history, and his own demise. Many argue that Caddy Compson is central to *The Sound and the Fury* and, despite her lack of narrative voice, her familial relationships often drive the narrative. However, as Faulkner states, this text is 'a tragedy of two lost women: Caddy and her daughter' and this muddies the notion of Caddy as central in every aspect, as her daughter, Quentin, can also be considered central (Stein, 1958, p.130). This is not to argue that Caddy's role is not pivotal as she affects all three brothers immeasurably: Quentin through his inability to accept her sexuality; Jason and his abiding hatred and blame of Caddy for losing his job opportunity when she divorced; Benjy,

**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

as his only human comfort. Caddy is an absent centre of the novel, witnessed only through the perspective of others. This creates an interesting position for the reader as she is never truly known, which formally reflects the enigma Caddy represents for her brothers. Caddy's truth is never found but is created through the joint perception of the author, the characters and the reader. As Norman N Holland (1976, p.816) states, 'we interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work,' therefore, Caddy creates a locus of interpretation that reflects through the reader.

One of the most interesting representations of Caddy is through the eyes of her brother Quentin. His interpretation of Caddy and his fixation on mythologised Southern edicts of behaviour result in his suicide. Many critics have pondered the incest theme of the text, both the undercurrent of sexuality within the interactions between Caddy and Quentin, and the false confession that Quentin makes to his father in an effort to save Caddy's reputation, claiming that he is the father of Caddy's child. There are many viewpoints on the incest theme and its function, such as Doreen Fowler's psychoanalytical reading of Caddy as mother figure. According to Fowler, it is this role as mother figure which leads to the incestuous suggestion within scenes such as the pseudo-suicide attempt of Quentin and Caddy, which is laden with sexual language. Fowler states that, 'Quentin's incestuous feelings for Caddy suggest...a desire to merge once again with the identifiatory imago' (Baum, 1976, pp39-40) and Richard Godden (1993, p.100) states, '[Quentin] appears to believe that incest might serve to heal the hymen [or] at least to involve the incestuous pair in a shame so great as to "isolate" them from "the loud world."' Although both critics make valid points, they relate solely to gender and Quentin's desire to capture the past. However, it is only with the introduction of class that the theme of incest is satisfactorily highlighted. As Flannery O'Connor (1988) stated, 'Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic' and in many ways this is the same for Faulkner. It is only through the contextualising of the South that the theme of incest moves from a representation of gender to a representation of class and gender and how they are interlinked. Quentin's confession of incest is motivated by his need to preserve his sister's virginity and when he confesses to his father it is expressed as:

you wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror and then exorcize it with truth and it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of

**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

necessity and then the sound of it would be as though it had never been and he did you try to make her do it and i was afraid to i was afraid (Faulkner, 1995, p.150).

This confession, which Godden (1993, p.112) states 'never happened, but is instead an imagined dialogue' has an unreal quality, which suggests both memory and imagination and is most likely a combination of both. Nevertheless, when considering the confession of wanting to commit incest 'i was afraid to i was afraid' (Faulkner, 1995, p.150) the idea that this is Quentin's imagination causes more ambiguity within such a confession, however, this sentence carries a tone of regret. In his staunch belief in Southern mythology, he has read his father's question of 'did you try to make her do it' (Faulkner, 1995, p.150) as a rebuff for not protecting his sister's reputation and that of the family. Instead of sensing the fear that is inherent in his father's question, Quentin is so embroiled in his beliefs that he misreads the question. For Quentin the idea of incest is motivated by a need to preserve Caddy's role in the white, southern myth of femininity. In his world of Southern ideals, Quentin reads something that is aberrant to the outside world as a preservation of their class and blood lines. As Godden (1993, p.110) states 'in the South, the very idea of incest involves a form of cultural heroism – raising the standard of the virgin – in the North, Quentin's return to that idea is deemed child-molestation'. This depiction of the Northern view on Southern ideals of class and gender produces an image that exposes their perverse nature; any system that would lead a young man to believe that incest is a preferable situation to unmarried sexual relations is highlighted as aberrant. Moreover, this incident links race, class and gender. For example, the judge originally fines Quentin a dollar and then asks the question:

"How far'd you run him, Anse?"

"Two miles, at least. It was about two hours before we caught him."

"H'm," the squire said. He mused a while... "six dollars." (Faulkner, 1995, pp.121-2)

This amendment to the fine suggests that the judge suspects a more serious crime and yet, in this light, the little girl is still only worth a six dollar fine. Her 'honour' is negligible due to her class, race and gender. As a female in this society she is at the mercy of the men that surround her; as an immigrant she experiences prejudice, as demonstrated through the assumptions of the baker who

**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

instantly assumes she is stealing because she is an immigrant. Moreover, as a working class child, the richer 'perpetrator' of the 'crime' has more power and status and is only fined.

As this incident demonstrates, race is integral to the conception of gender under the southern milieu. The rape of female slaves and the vile stereotype of the African-American male rapist led to a conflation of race and sexuality within Southern mythology. On several occasions throughout the text women are denigrated on the basis of gender and sexuality. For example, when disgusted with Caddy for her promiscuity, Quentin states, 'Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dark woods' (Faulkner, 1995, p.77). These stereotypes were used to control African-Americans but in turn were also used to control white women. The myth of white Southern femininity led white women to be untouchable and placed undue importance on white female virginity. As such, the comment about Caddy and her sexuality contains the locus of gender, race and class prejudices. After all, as their father states, 'Woman are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature' (Faulkner, 1995, p.97). The misogynist overtone aside, this demonstrates virginity is a manmade concept, highlighting Quentin's obsession as the product of an unnatural system.

Godden further relates gender, class and race via sexuality stating that each brother has incestuous desires and that these desires are conflated with the stereotypes of African-Americans found within the Southern social code. For example, Benjy is called a Bluegum by Versh. A Bluegum is an African-American conjuror who can impregnate through sight and it is this comparison which has led Godden to argue that the adoring looks at Caddy become incestuous desire (Godden, 1993, p. 101). Jason constantly refers to himself as a slave, and Quentin terms Caddy's lovers as 'blackguards' and equates her sexuality with African-American women. Although Godden's argument has its limitations, for example, the suggestion that Benjy wishes to have impregnated Caddy through his look is somewhat stretched. There is a distinct meshing of the idea of sexuality and race within *The Sound and the Fury*. Moreover, as the sexuality contained within the text is incestuous, it is fair to assume that, in this context, the conflation of African-Americans with sexual desire is also to consider a comparison within the text between incest as a deviant behaviour and the suggestion that mixed race relationships are also perceived as deviant within this milieu. The racial hierarchy of Southern mythology is expressed through the conflict in the language of the text, for example,



## **Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

when Caddy's daughter Quentin pushes away Dilsey's comforting hand with the comment 'you damn old nigger' (Faulkner, 1995, p.158). Caddy's action combined with her words are contradictory, as Thadious M. Davis states, 'simultaneously, the white girl reaches out for Dilsey as a mother substitute and rejects "the nigger" who could never be her mother...her rebuke reflects the stratification of the world she lives in' (Davis, 1983, p.93). However, this stratification is not just that of the racist society: as an African-American woman, Dilsey exemplifies the meeting of all these class codes. It is this triple prejudice which results in Dilsey being treated in this manner by a teenager, who in turn suffers no consequences for her disrespect. This represents the continuing legacy of the slave economy of the south which was structured rigidly around hierarchical codes of race, gender and class, all three of which are inextricably linked.

Faulkner's engagement with the social codes of the south are the backbone of his work and it is the interaction of class, race and gender as seen through the prism of history, which highlights the ambiguity and complexities of Southern society. It is the inheritance of such a history, and the need to mythologise the past in order to provide a more bearable present for both victim and perpetrator of the antebellum South, which is the underpinning of Southern mythology, *The Sound and the Fury*, and the tragedy of the Compson family. As John Earl Bassett (1981, p.2) argued, '*The Sound and the Fury*...transforms...personal anxieties into a fiction with profound cultural implications'. And it is the complexity of these personal anxieties that creates an ambiguity, and this ambiguity echoes the dizzying and knotty mess that is the mythologizing of class, race and gender within the South. It is the representation of this myth combined with its subtle unpicking which creates the complexity of *The Sound and the Fury*, and it is the interaction between the codes of race, gender and class exemplified through the subjective perspectives of the text which exemplify the insidious nature of the prejudices inherent in the Southern myth. The exploration of these codes and their historical basis raises new questions with each reading and through the text retains relevance and endurance; a true mark of the importance and indelible nature of Faulkner's work.

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**Born below Mason and Dixon': The role of Quentin Compson and the interaction of the racial, gender and class codes of the South in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.**

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