

## Invertible Gender in the Postbellum South : The Ambiguous Identity of Quentin Compson in The Sound and the Fury

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# Invertible Gender in the Postbellum South: The Ambiguous Identity of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*

Sachi Yoshimura

## Introduction

Quentin Compson is a curious character, showing up in some of William Faulkner's successive tales – collectively called the Yoknapatawpha saga –, though his age varies in each story. Faulkner created a fictitious region called “Yoknapatawpha” as the imaginative world in which his novels in Mississippi are set. In Yoknapatawpha, there is a town named “Jefferson,” where Quentin was born in 1891. He was the first son of the Compson family, which was famous and had power in the antebellum South, but declined after the Civil War. Quentin attended Harvard University for two years; however, he finally committed suicide during his second year at university. In the Yoknapatawpha saga, Quentin sometimes observes conversations or events among his siblings and parents, while at other times he is involved in them directly.

This thesis focuses on Quentin Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and clarifies the relation between his ambiguous identities, especially in regard to gender and the South in America after the Civil War. Traditionally, as Henry W. Grady, the editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*, said, “The Old South ... rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth” (Tindall and Shi 748). In fact, southerners interwove their lives with a community and thrived within it. Based on the lifestyle from the past, the South was inclined to value patriarchal family relations until the present; therefore, there are many retrospective perspectives on

the past, tradition, and identity of the South in Southern literature (Hiraishi 475-76). In the postbellum era, the South, which lost in the Civil War, was in chaos because the concepts which southerners had believed or the traditions that they had persisted to practice until the end of the Civil War were changed and they had to accept a new fashion; for example, the abolishment of slavery by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865 allowed enslaved Americans to seize their freedom.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the traditions or identities that southerners had were no longer maintained and they were compelled to convert their identity. Quentin is one of these southerners faced with such inverted concepts, and he had to accept a new fashion; as a result, the identity he establishes is ambiguous, especially that of gender, in the Yoknapatawpha saga.

Ricky Floyd Dobbs argues the role of Quentin in Faulkner's early work and regards him as a pessimistic character that sees the collapse of the South and of the Compson family. Dobbs points out that "the Lost Cause and his father's cynicism" influences Quentin's character and finally destroys him (366). However, Jackson J. Benson criticizes previous studies of Quentin, stating that they have focused too much on the negative aspects, and that "most critics seem to have been unable to bring together the obvious importance of this major character in Faulkner's early work with their essentially negative reactions to Quentin's character and role" (215). While Quentin's pessimism may cast some negative aspects on the stories, I suppose that, comparing him as a dying figure in the postbellum South, Quentin also probably plays a significant role in proposing how people should find and establish their identity to exist in the future.

In order to examine Quentin's identity, I will analyze *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, Chapter 1 picks up the name of "Quentin" to clarify the ambiguity of his gender and makes clear that this ambiguity forces Quentin into a female role in the relationship with Dalton Ames. In Chapter 2, I argue the relation

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<sup>1</sup> For the details of the movements after the Civil War, see Tindall and Shi, 702-06.

<sup>2</sup> Whenever I quote words or lines from *The Sound and the Fury* and write in-text citations, I use the following abbreviations: *SF* for *The Sound and the Fury*.

between Quentin's ambiguous identity and the falling South. At the end, I propose that Quentin Compson serves as a symbol of the declining South and expresses a feature of people who survive in the future, regarding their identity.

## Chapter 1

### Invertible Gender: The Name of Quentin and the Structure of Rape

The ambiguity of Quentin's identity is especially expressed in his gender. In order to analyze his gender, I first pick up his name, "Quentin." There are two persons who have the name Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* – the first son of the Compsons and the daughter of Caddy. Apparently, the name Quentin is applied to both a son and daughter, which means that the name Quentin is neither necessarily a male name nor expresses male gender. The fact that the name Quentin is applied to both a son and daughter effectively represents the ambiguity of his gender identity. In order to distinguish between the two Quentins in this thesis, I call the first son of the Compsons "Quentin" and the daughter of Caddy "Miss Quentin."

The story begins with the narration of Benjamin, the third son of the Compsons. Benjamin cannot understand the concept of the passage of time, for his intelligence is equivalent to that of a three-year-old child. Luster, an African-American boy,<sup>3</sup> says to a boy playing golf, "[Benjamin] thirty three. ... Thirty three this morning," and the boy says, "You mean, he been three years old thirty years" (*SF* 17). Benjamin, through his perverted comprehension, narrates the day of April seventh, 1928, as if the past and present happenings had occurred at the same time. As Noel Polk has said, "the narrator [Benjamin] doesn't even register his own reaction to stimuli as a reaction. Since he sees no relationship between one thing and another, he can't even grasp his own relationship to the world" (Polk

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Sound and the Fury* and "That Evening Sun," Faulkner calls Dilsey or Nancy "Negro Woman," but in this thesis, I refer to them as "an African-American servant." As well, I call Luster, the grandson of Dilsey, "an African-American boy."

140-41).

As the result of Benjamin's confusion, the name Quentin inverts its gender frequently in section 1 of *The Sound and the Fury*. In the successive narration by Benjamin, he interweaves the conversation between Quentin and Caddy in the past with that of Dilsey, Luster and Miss Quentin in the present:

"Where Quentin." Dilsey said. "Supper near bout ready."

"I don't know'm." Luster said. "I ain't seen her."

Dilsey went away. "Quentin." she said in the hall. "Quentin. Supper ready."

*We could hear the roof. Quentin smelled like rain, too.*

*What did Jason do, he said.*

*He cut up at Benjy's [Benjamin] dolls, Caddy said.*

*Mother said to not call him Benjy, Quentin said. He sat on the rug by us. I wish it wouldn't rain, he said. You can't do anything.*

*You've been in a fight, Caddy said. Haven't you.*

*It wasn't much, Quentin said.*

*You can tell it, Caddy said. Father'll see it.*

*I don't care, Quentin said. I wish it wouldn't rain.*

Quentin said, "Didn't Dilsey say supper was ready." (SF 66)

When Dilsey has prepared for the meal, she asks Luster about "Quentin," and Luster replies that he has not seen her. This dialogue happens on April seventh, 1928, eighteen years after Quentin's suicide. Thus, the "Quentin" in Dilsey's dialogue stands for Miss Quentin. After this dialogue, written in italicized characters, a conversation between Caddy and Quentin appears. In Benjamin's consciousness, the sound of the roof connects the present to the past when he was with Caddy and Quentin. When he "[can] hear the roof," which means it begins raining, Benjamin says that "Quentin [smells] like rain," remembering the rainy day when he saw Quentin; nevertheless he narrates the scene on April seventh, 1928, in which

Quentin is no longer alive. In a conversation written in italicized characters, Quentin and Caddy talk about the name of Benjamin, for they changed his name from Maury to Benjamin in 1900. So the “Quentin” in the italicized lines is Quentin, the first son of the Compsons. After these italicized lines, the “Quentin” who answers Dilsey stands for Miss Quentin. The fact that the name Quentin represents both male and female is very symbolic for the ambiguity of Quentin’s gender, for the gender role of his name is compatible with a female one.

Moreover, Luster seems to make the gender of the name unclear in the conversation with Dilsey. When Dilsey asks Luster “where [Miss Quentin],” Luster says to her, “I dont know’m.” It is not written straightforwardly, but Luster possibly means “I don’t know him” exactly, and the pronoun for Miss Quentin also confuses the gender of the name Quentin. This is why perhaps Luster soon changes his words and says essentially the same thing, “I aint seen her,” replacing the pronoun “him” with “her.” At this time, Luster is fourteen years old, and Quentin has been dead for eighteen years, so Luster has not seen Quentin in his life-time.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not strange that he has heard about Quentin, after whom Caddy’s daughter is named perhaps, and it may happen that Luster mistakes the name Quentin for male or female. Therefore, the name Quentin is not used to describe whether it belongs to a male or female person, and the gender is not completely confirmed.

In addition to Quentin, there are two persons named “Jason” – the second son of the Compsons and the father of Quentin, Jason, Caddy and Benjamin. In this thesis, I call the second son of the Compsons Jason, whereas I refer to the father as Mr. Compson. As with the name of Quentin, the name of Jason also sometimes represents the second son of the Compsons, sometimes the father in the consciousness of Benjamin:

“When is the Lawd’s own time, Dilsey.” Caddy said.

“It’s Sunday.” Quentin said. “Don’t you know anything.”

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<sup>4</sup> According to Faulkner, Luster is “a man, aged 14” (“Appendix” 647).

“Shhhhhh.” Dilsey said. “Didn’t Mr. Jason say for you all to be quiet.” (*SF* 25)

This is a conversation among Caddy, Quentin and Dilsey at the funeral of Damuddy in 1898. In this conversation, “Mr. Jason” stands for Mr. Compson, whereas the “Mr. Jason” in the following conversation is the second son of the Compsons:

Luster said, “Mr. Jason.”

“What.” Jason said.

“Let me have two bits.” Luster said. (*SF* 67)

The conversation takes place on April seventh, 1928. Mr. Compson has been dead since 1912 and Quentin since 1910. It means that Jason is the man who should be the breadwinner in the Compson family, for he is the only male who can earn his living. Thus, Luster seems to call him Mr. Jason as if he regarded him as a master of the Compsons, like Mr. Compson.

As for Benjamin’s appreciation of the two Quentins and Jasons, Polk states that “Benjy doesn’t have any trouble understanding which of the two ‘Quentins’ or ‘Jasons’ is meant” (141). It is appropriate that Benjamin does not care about which Quentin or Jason is there with him, but it is noticeable that the name Jason is applied for only males, whereas the name Quentin applies to both male and female, which implies the different quality of Quentin’s name from that of Jason. That is, Quentin is not always male and cannot express the strong characteristics of male gender compared to Jason. Furthermore, Jason is named after his father, Mr. Compson, which means that his name also functions to represent a strong character of a male who is a father. For instance, Caddy asks Jason to look after Miss Quentin on April sixth, 1928:

“You’ll [Jason] have to promise to take care of her [Miss Quentin], to  
– She’s kin to you; your own flesh and blood. Promise, Jason. You have

Father's name: do you think I'd have to ask him twice? Once even?"  
(*SF* 209)

In this dialogue, she emphasizes that Jason is the name of their father and that he was named after Mr. Compson. Namely, Caddy tries to assign a duty to secure her daughter for the reason that Jason has their father's name. Also, a father's name symbolizes the authority of a family in a patriarchal society such as the South. Therefore, compared to Quentin, whose name can be applied for both male and female, Jason strongly expresses the male gender.

Furthermore, the inversion of Quentin's gender is clearly visible when he meets Dalton Ames, who is a lover of Caddy. In chapter 2 of *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin calls to Dalton Ames on a bridge and tries to assail him for the fact that he had deprived Caddy of her virginity, asking if he has a sister:

I [Quentin] hit him [Dalton Ames] my open hand beat the impulse to shut it to his face his hand moved as fast as mine the cigarette went over the rail I swung with the other hand he caught it too before the cigarette reached the water he held both my wrists in the same hand .... (*SF* 160)

Quentin warns Dalton Ames to leave Jefferson and attempts an attack on him, but Dalton Ames catches Quentin's hand quickly. Then Quentin vainly tries to hit Dalton Ames using the other hand, but it is grabbed by Dalton Ames, too, and he seizes Quentin fiercely.

Quentin's seizure by Dalton Ames is associated with the violence to Miss Quentin by Jason:

I [Jason] grabbed her [Miss Quentin] by the arm. She dropped the cup. It broke on the floor and she jerked back, looking at me, but I held her arm. ... She slapped at me. I caught that hand too and held her like a wildcat. (*SF* 183)



Grabbed by the arm, Miss Quentin tries to back away from Jason, but he never releases her from his grip. She attempts to strike him with the other hand, only to be caught by Jason, and becomes powerless “like a wild cat.” In all, both Quentin and Miss Quentin are under restraint by Dalton Ames or Jason.

The structure of the two Quentins restricted by two men leads to an association with rape. At first, Dalton Ames is a man having sexual intercourse with Caddy, so perhaps Quentin, gripped by Dalton Ames, identifies himself with Caddy, who is raped by Dalton Ames. Through identifying himself with Caddy, Quentin puts himself in a feminine role with Dalton Ames and regards himself as a raped woman. Besides, Jason, who does violence to Miss Quentin, plays the role of a rapist man, whereas Miss Quentin plays that of a raped woman. Therefore, the two Quentins are placed in the position of a raped woman, and Quentin is meant to play the role of a raped woman. Consequently, his male gender is threatened, and the gender identity of Quentin becomes ambiguous.

## Chapter 2

### Ambiguous Gender Identity of Two Quentins in the Postbellum South

The comparison of the gender between Quentin and Miss Quentin clearly describes a man who has lost the power to resist violence and a woman who is never defeated by violence. Quentin is irresistible to Dalton Ames and can do nothing against him. The irresistible attitude of Quentin is also seen in the bedroom in his youth. In Benjamin’s narration, on the day of the funeral, Benjamin witnesses Quentin trying not to see Caddy:

Caddy unbuttoned Jason. He began to cry.

“You want to get whipped.” Dilsey said. Jason hushed....

Quentin and Versh came in. Quentin had his face turned away. "What are you crying for." Caddy said.

"Hush." Dilsey said. "You all get undressed, now. You can go home, Versh." (*SF* 73)

This is before they go to bed, and they are about to change into pajamas. While Caddy is helping Benjamin to get undressed, Quentin and Versh come into the room. Then, Quentin "[has] his face turned away." At this time, Caddy does not get undressed, but seeing Benjamin and Jason are getting undressed, he can guess that Caddy will get undressed soon, so that possibly he averts his eyes from Benjamin and Caddy. He does not take any actions to change the situation from which he wants to keep his eyes, neither by persuading Caddy to stop changing her clothes in front of Quentin nor by running away from the room. This attitude shows Quentin's powerlessness against the association between Caddy and sex, in other words, the situation he does not want to be in.

According to John T. Irwin, the lost power seen in Quentin is also obvious in Mr. Compson, which leads Quentin to diminish his masculinity:

In *The Sound and the Fury*, when Quentin demands that his father act against the seducer Dalton Ames, Quentin, by taking this initiative, is in effect trying to supplant his father, to seize his authority. But Quentin's father refuses to act, and the sense of Mr. Compson's refusal is that Quentin cannot seize this father's authority because there is no authority to seize. (58)

As a father, Mr. Compson does not show authority to his son, Quentin Compson. Consequently, the lost authority of the father influences the son deeply. Finally, it leads Quentin's gender to be threatened and his identity as a male to be ambiguous.

This is a result of the inverted concepts in the South caused by the Civil War in the 1860's. The war's aftermath provided the South with the abolition of

slavery and the movement of reconstructing the defeated area. “The defeat of the Confederacy transformed much of the southern society. The freeing of slaves, the destruction of property, and the collapse of land values left many planters destitute and homeless” (Tindall and Shi 704). With such new waves coming to the South, the traditional family structure based on the agricultural economy was declining in the reconstruction of the South. Along with the collapse of the traditional family structure, the patriarchy no longer held, and *The Sound and the Fury* describes the fall of the South or of family traditions, such as the Compson’s.<sup>5</sup>

This movement escalates the South to lose the identity it has established. The defeated South lost the power to resist the North, which compelled the South to lose its own identity. Thus, after the Civil War, the South lost its unique character, such as the traditional family structure or slavery, and became equalized with the other areas of America so that the unique area which is the South has disappeared. This is one of the representations of the declining South in the postbellum. This situation of the South is similar to that of Quentin Compson, who is defeated by Dalton Ames and fails to play the masculine role of a brother required in patriarchal society.

On the other hand, Miss Quentin shows a proactive attitude in order to change the situation against the authority of Caroline:

*Here she [Miss Quentin] come, he [Luster] said. Be quiet, now. We [Benjamin and Luster] went to the window and looked out. It came out of Quentin’s window and climbed across into the tree. We watched the tree shaking. The shaking went down the tree, then it came out and we watched it go away across the grass. Then we couldn’t see it. (SF 74)*

After Miss Quentin enters her room, Caroline “locks the door” so that Miss Quentin

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<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Scott points out that “*The Sound and the Fury* is the story of the fall of a house, the collapse of a provincial aristocracy in a final debacle of insanity, recklessness, psychological perversion” (116). Cleanth Brooks accounts the fall of the house, connecting it with the fall of the old aristocratic order (306).

cannot go out at night (*SF* 73). This situation may remind readers of a chivalric situation in which a princess who is confined to a room waits for a knight to emancipate her. Nevertheless, Miss Quentin does not wait for any knight but escapes from the room, climbing down a tree, and runs away across the lawn of the Compson's house by herself. In addition, Miss Quentin robs money from a metal box that Jason has been keeping secretly (*SF* 283-84). Actually, the money is seemingly from Caddy, who sent it to her daughter, Miss Quentin, and asked Jason to give it to her. Therefore, it is Miss Quentin who should possess the money, so that she can finally get her possession back by herself without surrendering it to Jason. Compared to Quentin, Miss Quentin takes actions by herself to overcome the situations that she does not want to be in. Also, unlike Quentin, who cannot resist the violence done by Dalton Ames, Miss Quentin escapes from the locked room in the Compson house by herself and resists the violence of the authority. In all, Miss Quentin is representative of a strong woman who resists the violence by men or their authority, both sexually and physically.

In addition, Miss Quentin's room in the Compson house is very symbolic, as it represents the ambiguity of her gender identity. After Miss Quentin left the Compson family in the morning on Easter Sunday, April eighth, 1928, Jason, Caroline and Dilsey enter her room and find that Miss Quentin has run away by climbing out of the window of her room:

They went in. It was not a girl's room. It was not anybody's room, and the faint scent of cheap cosmetics and the few feminine objects and the other evidences of crude hopeless efforts to feminize it but added to its anonymity, giving it that dead and stereotyped transience of the rooms in assignation houses. (*SF* 282)

When the room is considered to be the symbol of its owner, Miss Quentin, the room represents the ambiguity of her gender identity. That the room is "not a girl's room" signifies Miss Quentin's loss of her gender identity as female. The room is also

described as “not anybody’s room”: namely, Miss Quentin has lost her identity completely. Moreover, from “the other evidences of crude hopeless efforts to feminize it [the room],” we can see that the room used not to be for a girl, but perhaps for Quentin when he was alive. After Quentin’s death and the birth of Miss Quentin, the room has been used for Miss Quentin and arranged as a girl’s room. However, as Caroline seems to have understood well when she says, “I knew the minute they named her Quentin this would happen” (*SF* 283), a person named “Quentin” cannot completely be feminized and the room symbolizes that failure. Therefore, the room can be read as a symbol of the ambiguous gender identity of Quentin and Miss Quentin.

Miss Quentin runs away by herself from the room, which shows the ambiguity of her gender. It seems to mean that she tries to leave the situation in which she is forced to play on unwanted role. Moreover, the room is a part of the Compson family, which was eminent and had power in the Old South. Unlike Quentin, who is identified with the declining South and dies at last, Miss Quentin leaves the Compsons, which forces her to acquire an unwanted identity, and becomes a figure who will survive in the future while proving her identity as her own.

## Conclusion

Quentin jumps into a river and commits suicide on June second, 1910, in *The Sound and the Fury*. Melvin Backman explains the reason of his suicide as the loss of his sister’s honor (27). I agree with Backman’s opinion; in addition, I argue that the suicide is an effective symbol to represent the ambiguous gender of Quentin in the postbellum South and prove his losing gender identity. Because of the loss of his sister’s honor, Quentin finally has to meet Dalton Ames and be assigned to a female gender role. This assignment of the gender role aggravates Quentin’s ambiguous gender identity, caused by the lost authority of his father after the defeat

of the South in the Civil War.

Quentin Compson, along with the South defeated in the Civil War, is trapped in society and its values, which lead him to commit suicide, because it is the South that establishes Quentin's identity; thus, it may be said, the fall of the South leads to the death of Quentin. Miss Quentin, however, leaves the South and proves her identity on her own. The invertible gender of Quentin means the gender of Miss Quentin is also invertible at the same time. Certainly, it is true that both Quentins' genders are ambiguous; but while Quentin can do nothing under the violence committed by Dalton Ames and just has to be obedient to him, Miss Quentin, on the other hand, never yields to the Compson family and escapes from the situation which forces her to acquire an unwanted identity. Miss Quentin's attitude enables her to find and establish her identity by herself, unlike Quentin, who is forced to lose his identity and dies in postbellum America.

In this thesis, I have focused on Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and have argued that he symbolizes the falling South in postbellum America and that, as a dying figure, he is in stark contrast to Miss Quentin, who survives. At the same time, Quentin Compson shows that it is meaningless to force a person to acquire a different identity from that of his or her own. In all, a person's identity has to be acquired by his or her own volition, as Miss Quentin tries to acquire her identity by herself, leaving the falling South behind and surviving into the future.

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