

Female Characters' Productivity in William Faulkner's Novels

CAO Shuo^{1,*}

CAO Xu²

Abstract: Female characters play an important role in William Faulkner's novels to display his own argument with the judgment imposed on women by his society. This paper explores female characters' productivity Faulkner created in *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Mansion*, from the aspects of their influence on manhood establishment, their maternal power, and their ability to talk in the male- dominating Yoknapatawpha society, to support that Faulkner holds a positive attitudes towards women.

Key words: Female Character; Productivity; William Faulkner

DOI: 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110203.008

INTRODUCTION

A dichotomy is presented in Faulkner's delineation of female characters, Mrs. Compson, an irresponsible mother as she was over absorbed in the past, contrasting with Dilsey, a servant of perseverance and endurance; Eula, the object of male obsession, foiling to Linda, who took advantage of men in the Jefferson community for her revenge on her father. Besides the binary woman group, in each female character we can also find both destructive and productive forces. As Fowler (1985) put it, "she is the Other who lets herself be taken without ceasing to be the Other, and therein she is so necessary to man's happiness and to his triumph that it can be said that if she did not exist, men would have invented her" (p.97). Since women characters' disruptive power is conspicuous, as is in Caddy's promiscuity leading up to Quentin's suicide and Linda's plotted murdering her father, I intend to explore in this paper the productive power of Faulkner's fictional women exerted upon the male world, by focusing on Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* and Linda in *The Mansion*, in hope of tracking Faulkner's positive attitudes towards women.

MANHOOD ESTABLISHMENT

In *The Town* and *The Mansion*, William Faulkner casts the narrator of the novel as an adult looking back on his boyhood. Through interaction with Eula and Linda, Gavin and Chick establish their manhood. In particular, Chick is always told and observing male- female relationship and father- daughter

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, 116023, China.

* Corresponding Author.

² School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, 116023, China.

† Received April 4, 2011; accepted June 16, 2011.

relationship which both focus on Linda. In a sense, Linda acts as a strong woman who helps initiate Chick into manhood (Sweeney, 1985, p.341).

In *the Town*, all this time, Gavin has not had a clue about Linda's veiled "play"; he simply does not know that woman is capable of "a determinable identity". Eula earlier in *The Town* says that Gavin does not know much about woman; indeed, he did not understand Eula in reality at the time. Likewise, in *The Mansion*, he has no inking and even does not care about what Linda wants or is, because the romantic Gavin still thinks that "women are wonderful: it doesn't really matter what they want or if they themselves even know what it is they think they want" (p. 365). Gavin's rhetoric here puts women in the same, "proper" place--- idealized and silenced--- and renounces their sexual difference and individual subjectivity and autonomy. Yet, Gavin's fantasy of woman's sexual identity is no longer appropriate to Linda. The outside experiences give Linda her great maturity, her sexual, political, and economic autonomy, as she courageously moves on into the world around her: her marriage with the politically radical Jewish artist shows her emotional and sexual autonomy from family and Jefferson community; her participation in the war and her being a Communist and later a teacher of black children demonstrate her political radical ness; and her job as a riveter in an aircraft factory proves her economic independence. As a representative female figure in a new sociocultural context, Linda establishes in Gavin a new perspective to observe sexuality and women's position so that he can have a complete and mature masculinity and manhood. At the end of the novel, Gavin can confront Linda's sexual body. "He touches her, learning and knowing not with despair or grief" (p. 423).

In the initial scene between Maggie and Charles where a cohesive marriage was enlivened by light-hearted bantering, Chick for the first time realizes the conflict between womanhood and manhood. Maggie appears to be the central figure in the family, sitting at the end of the table in the symbolic position of mistress of the house, across from her father with Charles and her twin brother, Gavin Stevens, on either side. Chick's attention is drawn to Maggie's literal position in relation to Charles and Gavin as he notes twice that Maggie is "between them"(p. 3). His repetition suggests his consciousness of her strong figurative position in between.

In *The Mansion*, Gavin, Linda and Chick are among the few in Jefferson who have gone away from the local community, had themselves educated, and returned to put their knowledge and education to work within the community for its own good. In a sense, they could identify each other, due to Gavin's education on Linda and Chick as well as Linda's influence on manhood of the two men, on Chick, in particular. Linda is treated with sympathy by Gavin, Chick and Ratliff, and defends Linda's right to do "whatever her idealism demands that she should do" (Gwin, 1990, p. 226).

Chick likens her at times to a hunting dog sighting prey, a "young pointer bitch, the maiden bitch of course, the virgin bitch, immune now in virginity, not scorning the earth, spurning the earth because she needed it to walk on in that immunity" (Town, p. 132). When Linda's Yankee boxer beau Matt Leavitt tries to mess with Gavin, she clocks him one and calls him "a clumsy ignorant stupid son of a bitch! It was the first time I ever heard any woman say that. No: the first time I ever heard any woman say that", causing Chick to reassess some white, Southern, male notions of young ladyhood (Town p. 190-191).

Faulkner's novels follow a bildungsroman pattern that a child's journey from boyhood to manhood is told through the perspective of an adult reflecting upon the past. Chick's progress is measured by his learning to listen to the feminine elements within himself, and overcoming his fear of them. As old Ephraim intuits, "young folks and women" are linked in Faulkner's novels by their ability to listen to the difference within the voice of culture. Chick learns to hear his message of what it is to be a man or a woman in a patriarchal society, through and beyond the rhetoric of telling the story and the observation of what happened to Eula and Linda.

Linda's body is a matter for much speculation for Chick Mallison, who thinks she is "too tall to have shape. Women like that and once you get their clothes off they surprise you even if she was twenty- nine years old now. Fine eyes too, that probably if you were the one to finally get the clothes off you would have called them beautiful, too" (Mansion, p. 198). It is interesting that now Chick is consciously competing with Gavin for Linda when she stands in between them. "She was as tall as Gavin and damn near as tall as me, as well as a nail- biter though maybe that had come the shell or perhaps after the bereavement" (p. 199). Sexual fantasy marks Chick's maturity as a man.

Linda returned to Jefferson community, which has a huge impact on Chick. The outside experiences give Linda her great maturity, her sexual, political, and economic autonomy, as she courageously moves on into the world around her: her marriage with the politically radical Jewish artist shows her emotional and sexual autonomy from family and Jefferson community; her participation in the war and her being a Communist and later a teacher of black children demonstrate her political radical ness; and her job as a riveter in an aircraft factory proves her economic independence. Such experiences allow her to shape her feminine consciousness that will collapse adult men's belief system, but it arouses young Chick's judgment.

... both of them were already well advanced outside the Jefferson pale, not by being professed communists: nobody would have cared how much of a communist the little one [of the two Finns] merely professed himself to be so long as he didn't actually interfere with local wage scales ... but Negro-lovers: consorters, political affiliators with Negroes.... But association of any sort was too much; the local police were already looking cross-eyed at them.... (p. 523-24).

The remark is full of the mockery and bias of a "male white Jefferson. It shows, from Chick's observation that the Communism, a brand-new political concept, is introduced into Jefferson and he found people hated it. Chick's maturity can be found in that Gavin was so well satisfied with the Mallisons as a substitute for a family of his own, with a wireless listener in Charels for his incorrigible loquacity, so lacking in a realistic and aggressive approach to sex, and so romantic and permanently adolescent that he married late, in 1942, and had no children of his own. It is possible that he was a step-father in 1946, at the end of *The Mansion*. At that time Charles Mallison was still unmarried, but he had served in World War II from 1941 to 1945. *The Town* and *The Mansion* often point to Gavin's shortcoming, but near the end of the *Mansion*, Faulkner allows Chick to offer a tribute to his uncle after narrating and taking hold of what is going on between his uncle and Linda:

"Because he is a good man, wise too except for the occasions when he would aberrate, go momentarily haywire and take a wrong turn that even I could see was wrong, and then go hell- for- leather, with absolutely no deviation from logic and rationality from then on, until he wound us up in a mess of trouble or embarrassment that even I would have had sense enough to dodge. But he is a good man. Maybe I was wrong sometimes to trust and follow him but I was never wrong to love him" (p. 354).

MATERNAL POWER

Western culture idealizes mothers but condemns female sexuality. We may see Caddy, as she moves through Benjy's world, as its creator, the maker of stars, the creator of color and motion and natural beauty.

Caddy is presented aurally and sensually in *The Sound and the Fury*. She is the voice Benjy hears as well as a comforting and loving presence. She is also a pleasant, natural odor and a predominant visual image for Benjy. Caddy's chief importance for Benjy, however, who cannot speak except in bellows of pain, is that of creator and conveyor of language. Caddy attempts to create language for Benjy; she also translate--- correctly--- his non-verbal communication into meaningful language for the rest of the family, and for himself. With Benjy, Caddy is consistently gentle, loving, and teaching, just like a mother.

Caddy uses repetition so that Benjy will understand that there is a name for the action; but more importantly, she herself participates in the action. She is one with Benjy, instead of giving him commands as her mother and Jason do ("You, Benjamin"). She also uses his name, a diminutive form, lovingly, both the first and second- given names, with no distinction. In Caddy's speech, all Benjy's names become loving.

Throughout their one- sided dialogue, Caddy's method remains the same--- repetition of key words, repetition of Benjy's name, touch and action to accompany and illustrate language and support. Her

patience is remarkable, and Faulkner points out repeatedly that Caddy is only a child herself. "Keep your hands in your pockets. Or they'll get froze. You don't want your hands froze on Christmas, do you." Whenever Caddy talks to Benjy, she moves to his level--- stooping, bending over, as when she comes home from school:

Caddy was walking. Then she was running, her book-satchel swinging and jouncing behind her. "Hello, Benjy." Caddy said. She opened the gate and came in and stooped down. Caddy smelled like leaves. "Did you come to meet me." She said. "Did you come to meet Caddy. What did you let him get his hands so cold for, Versh"(p. 5).

In these early scenes, Faulkner also shows the advantage of Caddy's responsible behavior toward Benjy. She knows what the child means, wants, and feels. Others in the family do not, partly because they do not communicate directly with him. As his motivation, Caddy serves as a mother, not just to Benjy but to all of her brother, who find themselves confronted with problematic maternal ties to both their biological and symbolic mothers. Thus, while their narratives, except for Jason's, lack the overt condemnation of Caddy which they all display towards Caroline, they also reveal their unbreakable ties to Caddy, ties which deny them full control over their own identities. By his indirection, Faulkner had allowed Caddy to approach the position of all- powerful and all- encroaching mother rather than simply the mother of Miss Quentin. As Clarke put in *Erasing and Inventing Motherhood*, "doubly abandoned, first by Caroline and then by Caddy, the Compson men achieve a kind of revenge in fixing both, in allowing each woman to be defined only through the perspectives of her son/brother" (Clarke, 1994, p. 21). It is noticeable how much men value and appreciate motherhood.

TALKING OUT OF SILENCE

Caddy is treated by Faulkner as are other young women characters who are the object of their brother's incestuous love. Caddy serves as "a sort of Libido" in any Freudian discussion of this novel, but Caddy is a type of catalyst that creates all the actions around her.

Unlike Eula in *the Town* who was forced to place herself into the silent space for the preserve patriarchal ideology, Linda lives in defiance of and indifference to the laws and values of the patriarchy. In her deafness she exists outside community convention and morality: "outside human sound" and "outside human time". Linda now knows the truth about Flem, about how contemptible and inhumane he has been in his marriage with her mother and in his manipulation of her genuine daughterly love and respect for him. Linda uses Gavin and Mink to work her vengeance on the father. Her revenge reveals her creative power to interpret critically the world surrounding her, a birth of a new feminine consciousness which negates the Father's law. Charles informs us that, unlike Eula and young Linda, the returned, mature Linda is no longer the object of Flem's transaction for his economic and political rise: "even he [Flem] has realized by now that he simply cannot foreclose her out of existence like a mortgage or a note"(p. 201). Linda herself asserts that Flem's law and power no longer affect her: in the incident of the loss of her communist membership card, to the worrying Gavin who imagines what Flem can do with the card- either holding "the threat of turning it in to the F. B. I. over her" or "committing "his only child to the insane asylum" (p. 240)- she only responds, "Does it matter?", showing her fearlessness and aloofness to the father's possible threats over her.

Even though Flem achieves all he wants in life, the image of him "chewing steady on nothing" always lingers around him, showing the emptiness and nothingness within: "with his feet propped against the side of the fireplace: not reading, not doing nothing: jest setting with his hat on, chewing that same mouth- sized chunk of air he had been chewing ever since he quit tobacco" (p. 157). Even when Gavin comes to warn him about Mink's early pardon which might lead to his death, Flem only cares about the amount of money Gavin gave to Mink under the condition that in accepting the money the latter should never cross the Mississippi line. To Flem, the utmost value of his life has been the accumulation of money; yet it gives him nothing worthy of human life's value. The final moment of his life culminates in the emptiness as he, sitting "immobile and even detached too" (p. 415), faces Mink, who pulls the trigger, and does nothing to protect himself from Mink's second shot which kills him.

Unlike his whole life story of money-making, Flem almost dispassionately embraces his death. Gavin describes Flem's empty life at his funeral: "He had no auspices either: fraternal, civic, nor military: only finance; not an economy---cotton or cattle or anything else which Yoknapatawpha County and Mississippi were established on and kept running by, but belonging simply to Money" (p. 419). Although Flem has solidified his control over Jefferson by his rapacious capitalism, he possesses nothing of the community's tradition or value system. With all his monuments and economic success, he simply holds the community's center structure temporarily, neither understanding its essence nor truly possessing it.

CONCLUSION

Woman is the source and sustainer of virtue and also a prime source of evil. She can be either, because she is, as man is not, always a little beyond good and evil. With her powerful natural drives and her instinct for the concrete and personal, she does not need to agonize over her decisions. There is no code for her to master--- no initiation for her to undergo. For this reason she has access to a wisdom which is veiled from man; and man's codes, good or bad, are always, in their formal abstraction, a little absurd in her eyes. Women are closer to nature; the feminine principle is closely related to the instinctive and natural. Women are wonderful due to what they can provide for inspiration. Women are portrayed by William Faulkner in a paradoxical way. Women have both destructive and creative power on the whole Yoknapatawpha community, which is consistent with his dilemma of the South. Compared with the destruction, what women have produced in the male world is more note-worthy, which can support Faulkner's statement "I think women are wonderful. They're stronger than men." In his female characters, we can see a ray of sunshine shone upon the boring male-dominated Jefferson community.

REFERENCES

- Clarke, D. (1994). *Robbing the mother: Women in Faulkner*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi.
- Faulkner, W. (1990). *The sound and the fury*. New York: Vintage International
- . *The town*. New York: Vintage International
- . *The mansion*. New York: Vintage International
- Fowler, D. (1985). *Faulkner and women*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi
- Gwin, M. C. (1990). *The feminine and Faulkner*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press
- Kang, H. (1992). A new configuration of Faulkner's feminine: Linda Snopes Kohl in *The Mansion*. *The Faulkner Journal*, 8(1), 21-41
- Kartiganer, D. M. (1996). *Faulkner and gender*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Sweeney, P. E. (1985). *William Faulkner's women characters: An annotated bibliography of criticism*. Santa Barbara: ABC- Clio Information Service.