Few would argue that the degeneration and eventual disintegration of the Compson family in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is not driven in part by sexual confusion and the exercise of subversive sexual behaviors. The women of the last two Compson generations are both involved in unsanctioned exploration of their sexualities that carries them away from their stifling familial environment, while the men are each rendered impotent (in one case literally) because they are unwilling or unable to escape from the memory and influence of preceding generations. Interspersed with the promiscuity, misogyny, and incestuous feelings that variously characterize the Compsons as a whole, however, are subtler implications of homosexual leanings. This subtext is never enough to label any character as unquestionably gay or even attracted to another same-sex character, and yet Faulkner connects the two Quentins – the male Quentin himself and Miss Quentin and her enigmatic, red tie-wearing friend – with feminization and homosexual symbols. The resulting implications are as ultimately elusive and varied as the subtext itself, as these suggestions of homosexuality contribute to the overarching depiction of the decay – in thought and in way of life – of the Compson family and the Old South in general. Moreover, though, they also provide a final note of hope to the end of novel in the opportunity for emotional and sexual freedom from the oppressive social mores that precipitated the Compsons’ downfall.
Of course, that opportunity for freedom is frequently thwarted by the Compsons themselves, and the male Quentin is the most evident victim. The frantic disorganization of his mind on the day he commits suicide brings to the fore his obsession with the chivalrous attitudes toward women of the Old South, fueled with the thought that “no compson has ever disappointed a lady” (Faulkner 113), a fascination with his sister Caddy’s virginity and honor, and a contrasting desire to please his distant and unloving mother. To say that Quentin holds a distorted view of sexuality is an understatement given his willingness to firstly challenge Caddy’s suitors in formal combat – with disappointing results – and, “when still this fails, he then attempts to fill Caddy’s role himself as demure virgin” (Miller 40) by sharing in its loss. Quentin would rather that he and Caddy together experience the infamy attached to the loss of virginity by making a confession of incest to their father. Mr. Compson, meanwhile, only frustrates Quentin’s plans and compounds his current emotional tumult by casting a cynical eye over the standards of his predecessors. He disbelieves the claim of incest and dismisses Quentin’s worries about Caddy’s increasingly sexual behaviors, citing that “purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature” (Faulkner 74). The announcement of Caddy’s wedding adds an additional level of sexual confusion, as Quentin begins to ruminate on the “Little Sister Death” of St. Francis of Assisi (49). As the day continues he prepares for death with frightening deliberation and outward calm, and the events that temporarily interrupt his plans – an attempt to help a girl find her family and a meaningless and humiliating fight with a classmate – only reinforce his perceived failures as a brother and consequently his inability to follow his fixation on his sister through to any satisfying end. If Quentin ever attains any realization of his otherwise abstract sexual thoughts, it is only that “he ceremoniously gives himself, not to Caddy, but to the river” (Minter 352). His drowning is a fitting surrender; it is the only action in his life
he undertakes successfully and, because of the reality of the act, functions as a stronger metaphorical loss of virginity than imagined incest ever could.

For it is truly Quentin’s virginity and the lack of virility it supposedly represents that forms the basis of his sexual frustrations and leads to his feminization. Though Quentin is feminized for his lack of sexual experience externally by his classmates and even his father, who tells him that “it’s nature [virginity] is hurting you not Caddy” (Faulkner 74), his ready internalization of these statements in spite of their opposition to the conventionally masculine role he wishes to adopt is more significant. Quentin’s assertion that “no woman is to be trusted, but that some men are too innocent to protect themselves” (67) is too ambiguous in its tone and self-deprecating in its reversal of gender roles to attribute entirely to the influence of Mr. Compson’s cynical remarks. He connects the impotence of his own virginity and lack of action with traits he associates with women even as that connection ironically empowers him. Even though he fails miserably at defending Caddy’s honor by fighting Dalton Ames, he imagines the man’s death as he fantasizes that he “could have been his mother lying with open body lifted laughing, holding his father with [Quentin’s] hand refraining, seeing, watching him die before he lived” (51) in a vision of twisted but powerful maternity. Quentin embraces his virginity and his feminine characteristics even though they become objects of ridicule to other men; as such, he makes no real effort either to gain sexual experience (apart from a symbolically brief and unfulfilling encounter with a girl during his youth) or to counter his classmates’ mocking jabs. The reversal constitutes his only form of freedom from the strictly defined gender roles in which he is so entrenched. As with his almost-sexual fascination with Caddy, however, Quentin’s joins his subsequent identification with her and the feminine qualities she possesses (or is supposed to possess) with a longing for death as escape. He recognizes that, “as a virgin male, [he]
represents a failed patriarchy” but “if [he] can become that lady, identified as a resurrected pure and virgin Caddy, he cannot be disappointed by himself” (Campbell 62). As the final stage of his internalized feminization, Quentin’s transformation into the ideal Southern woman Caddy refused to be requires his own annihilation, an act that he believes will erase his failures as a man.

Given Quentin’s willingness to imagine himself in feminine terms his association with same-sex attraction is unsurprising, though any actual desire on his part is, as with everything else in his life, muted by his preference for thought above action. His aforementioned fantasy of being Dalton’s mother incorporates the idea of being in a relationship with a man (Dalton’s father), but the reality of his life at Harvard offers more immediate evidence that Quentin, in adopting a feminine identity, has acknowledged the possibility of attraction to men. His peers seem to have noticed his feminization at least as a subject for teasing – Spoade, one of the other students, refers to Quentin’s roommate Shreve as his husband (Faulkner 50). Even though it is only an immature mockery of Quentin’s virginity, the insult also emphasizes the beginning of Quentin’s section, a quietly domestic scene between Quentin and Shreve. Not only does Spoade’s remark not elicit any response from Quentin, he recalls it much later when he returns to his room and prepares to kill himself, again without any emotion (108). As fanatical as Quentin is regarding traditional concepts of gender, his acceptance of a submissive role relative to another man is remarkable except as an outgrowth of his feminine self-concept.

The nature of Quentin’s relationship his roommate is further obscured during a ride with Gerald Bland and his mother. Shreve’s behavior toward Quentin is for the most part friendly but not intimate – he defends Quentin from their classmates’ teasing and helps Quentin clean up after his unsuccessful attack on Gerald, for example – but in the car his concern manifests in a
physically and quasi-romantic contexts. Quentin becomes lost in his frantic thoughts and begins to alarm the others in the party, and Shreve puts his hand on Quentin’s knee to calm him down (93). The gesture fails, and Quentin eventually reacts only by moving his knee away. The subtle rejection “asserts the valor of [the] feminized virginity” that Quentin takes as his own, “eluding the sexual aggressor as a proper lady must do” (Campbell 62). Quentin has here done what Caddy has evidently never attempted – he has refused a man acting (probably unconsciously) as a suitor and thus has kept intact his purity.

Overall, Quentin’s anguished internal monologue during the car ride provides the clearest representation of the complexity of his sexual identity. The stream of consciousness that Shreve partially interrupts is as jumbled as Quentin’s thoughts usually are, and yet they effectively represent his anxiety about his virginity and even include possible elements of homosexual frustration:

I could feel it in my throat and I looked off into the trees where the afternoon slanted, thinking of afternoon and of the bird and the boys in swimming. But still I couldn’t stop it and then I knew that if I tried too hard to stop it I’d be crying and I thought about how I’d thought about I could not be a virgin, with so many of them walking along in the shadows and whispering with their soft girlvoices lingering in the shadowy places and the words coming out and perfume and eyes you could feel not see, but if it was that simple to do it wouldn’t be anything and if it wasn’t anything, what was I (93)

The primary source of Quentin’s internal conflict is the juxtaposition of the apparent simplicity of “it” – contextually romantic or sexual relationships with women – and his perception of women as mysterious and somewhat sinister. While he assumes a feminine identity with less complaint than might be expected given his value system, Quentin is unable to connect with
women other than Caddy, seeing them as almost predatory, “walking along in the shadows”, etc. Moreover, his attempt to understand the reason behind his continued lack of sexual experience comes as he tries to ignore an idyllic, disconnected scene with swimming boys. The passage summarizes the extent of Quentin’s confusion. He has begun to realize an emerging gender identity – and perhaps sexuality as well – at odds with the conservative values of the Old South. In the end, though, his realization is too late and too ineffective, and he is only able to accept his feelings and free himself from his moral code through death.

Quentin’s namesake in the next generation – appropriately female – likewise seeks an escape from the deteriorating world of the Compsons, and Miss Quentin’s flight from the fallen family also connects her indirectly with homosexual subtext. Her primary associate in the days preceding her departure from the Compson home appears first in Benjy’s section and occasionally throughout the three 1928 sections, and yet he has little real presence in the novel and is only ever identifiable by his red tie. Other than his tenuous connection to a traveling carnival, the man’s flashy neckwear is the only trait the narrating characters (and consequently the readers) note about him. Faulkner’s choice seems deliberate, as red ties were generally used as a form of identification for gay men in early twentieth century America (Abate 295) and Faulkner would almost certainly have known of the significance given his own affectations of dandyish behavior at the University of Mississippi (301). Furthermore, the possibility that the tie merely signifies that the man is a member of the carnival is unlikely, as formalwear would be out of place at a traveling show that appears to primarily appeal to the working classes. The man’s sole known characteristic may then be even more defining, although it also creates ambiguity in his relationship with Miss Quentin.
Though everyone assumes Miss Quentin is involved with the man in an illicit relationship just as her mother was with her various suitors, one family member at least seems conscious of alternative possibilities. Jason, a living representation of the bitterness and prejudice of the Old South against those outside its established social systems, is as contemptuous toward the man in the red tie as he is to the Compsons’ black servants and his mentally handicapped brother. When he sees the man for the first time with Miss Quentin in an alley his first thought is “what the hell kind of man would wear a red tie” (Faulkner 145). Whereas Jason treats Miss Quentin’s other acts of delinquency with exasperation, attempts at violent (but domestically contained) discipline, or cynical resignation that she will be just like her mother, he is so offended by the idea that he would “be laughed at by a man that would wear a red tie” and be connected to people who “come into town and call us all a bunch of hicks and think it’s too small to hold them” (152) that he would follow the man and Miss Quentin in public and even pursue them to another town. He envisions all his relatives as sources of embarrassment so varied in their social aberrance as to form a veritable encyclopedia of humiliation—Benjy’s retardation, Quentin’s suicide, and Caddy’s promiscuity, among others – and Miss Quentin’s friendship with a man who wears a red tie is yet another addition to the list of behaviors that Jason selfishly believes have been carried out to insult him. In the last section, Jason realizes that “he has been robbed not only by a woman but by someone ‘worse’ than a woman, a homosexual” (Abate 300), completing his shame and further personalizing the loss by depriving him of his much-prized savings as well as his dignity as a Compson.

The man in the red tie does more than enrage Jason to the point of irrationality; he is also emblematic of Miss Quentin’s liberation from the dying Compson household and way of life. The assumption that Miss Quentin has a sexual relationship with the man in the red tie would
paint her as even worse than her mother. Envisioning a memory alongside his experiences in the present, Benjy catches both Caddy and Miss Quentin with a man on the swing. Their distinct reactions – Caddy apologizes to Benjy, while Miss Quentin berates Luster for allowing Benjy to come near (Faulkner 31) – indicates that Miss Quentin lacks her mother’s conscience. However, the scene wherein Benjy discovers Miss Quentin suggests that, even if she is not as concerned about the morality of her actions, she is at least trying to be more careful than Caddy. The man in the red tie seems to know of Miss Quentin’s many partners, and his reaction to Luster’s discovery of a box of condoms outside the house is not jealousy but concern that one of her lovers would “leave a track” (33) and thereby risk discovery by the other Compsons. The understanding that the man in the red tie may be a homosexual as well as the box of condoms may attest to Miss Quentin’s caution, “fraternizing with gay men with whom she is not likely romantically involved and…cautiously using contraceptives when she is sexually active” (Abate 308). She is not simply repeating her mother’s mistakes. While running away with the man seems a foolhardy act of teenage rebellion, the escape is a sympathetic one in light of her uncle’s oppressive and self-serving authority. Her traveling companion is, as may be expected from a character without name or much significant dialogue, less important for understanding his sexual identity than he is a symbol of potential happiness outside the world Miss Quentin so desires to leave.

Like her namesake, Miss Quentin severs herself from an antiquated society degenerating around her by linking herself to homosexuality, an identity wholly alien to that society’s social and moral code. The second Quentin essentially follows the first, but she manages to become free to behave and associate as she will without destroying herself. The male Quentin is too stifled by the shadow of traditional Southern principles and his own tendency toward inaction to
take this additional step, but his symbolic reappearance in the next generation, along with Dilsey and her family (themselves also outsiders), offers the only hope for survival of the Compson identity beyond its final ruin. That the torch passes to a sexually active woman named after a man with a feminine identity and possible homosexual tendencies is an unusual but fitting gesture of potential in a novel otherwise filled with impotence and disastrous stasis.
Works Cited


