“Who was the woman?”: Feminine Space and the Shaping of Identity in *The Sound and the Fury*

Space used to be a gap in the study of social theory; it was not until the 1970s when academia experienced a “spatial turn,” commencing within the discipline of geography itself, that critical interests were largely shifted to space, and it became regarded as a significant interpretative paradigm. Feminist geography is the product of the interdisciplinary dialogues between feminist studies and literary geography within the context of this “spatial turn.” It emerged in the early 1970s and has effloresced since the 1980s. The concept of space within the field of feminist geography is no longer “a static or empty essence, but rather the spatial organization of human societies” (Friedman 109). Feminist geographers take into consideration the complex interactions between space and gender, as well as the ways in which gendered social roles and identities define and are defined by spatial environments, greatly enriching the practice of geography and opening up new avenues of literary studies. Initially, feminist geographers were mostly interested in the “unifying gendered experience” (Nelson and Seager 4) of women in patriarchal society, concentrating on women’s marginalized status during urbanization as well as their exclusion from working places and public life. In recent decades, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the heterogeneity among women and to the different ways in which they perceive space. As Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson point out, “while gender is one salient dimension in these experiences and associations, so too are age, class, ethnicity, and many other factors” (15). This paper views William Faulkner’s 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury* from the perspective of feminist geography and explores the different spatial experiences of the three Compson women under patriarchy, examining the relationships between gender, space, and self in the novel.

*The Sound and the Fury* reveals the disintegration of the Southern aristocratic Compson family from multiple perspectives, including three Compson brothers and an omniscient narrator. Although the story is narrated by the male characters, the three generations of Compson women—Mrs Compson, her daughter Caddy, and Caddy’s daughter Miss Quentin—play an indispensible part in the novel, and the mother-and-daughter plot could be seen as the novel’s core. There have been significant scholarly works focusing on the
Compton women and on the use of space in *The Sound and the Fury*. Specifically, a number of feminist studies have taken up questions of gender, sexuality, and race by interpreting the individual female characters' negotiations of patriarchal Southern culture. Critical studies concerning space in *The Sound and the Fury* have concentrated on the novel's spatial configuration and the significance of space for the male characters; for instance, Hortense Spillers has looked at spatial topographies in the novel and explored the phenomenon of "place as a function of time" (536) in the description of Quentin Compton. J. Hillis Miller notes that the novel's events "take place within an elaborately mapped mental or textual landscape" (211). Little attention, however, has been paid to the three Compton women's relationships to their spatial environments, or to the influence of feminine space on the shaping of their identities. In part three of the novel, Mrs Compton asks a central question: "Who was the woman?" (169). This is a crucial point that the novel endeavors to explore: in a society dominated by men, how can women understand who they are and create their selves? In *The Sound and the Fury*, the three Compton women's self-conceptions and attempts to construct their self-identities are significantly connected to feminine spaces, and their spatial experiences differ from one to the other due to their varying values and space consciousness.

I. MRS COMPTON: SPACE PARALYSIS AND IDENTITY ILLUSION

Historically, the culture of the Southern lady operates at the very core of the social conventions of the American south. The "Angel in the House" is often seen as the feminine ideal: she is a virtuous woman who is dedicated to her husband and children and faithfully serves her role at home, but consequently is relegated to limited spaces inside the familial home. Mrs Compton always imagines herself as such "a lady" (SF 195) and strives to fit the social norms of the Southern ideal, playing the role bestowed on her by patriarchal society. Some critics hold the view that Mrs Compton is indeed the archetypal Southern lady who assumes power as a hostess and caretaker of her family. In my view, however, Mrs Compton merely plays the role of a Southern lady; her dealings with space reflect her misunderstanding and misinterpreting of the core components of this social ideal.

The way people think about space reflects their worldviews and affects their understanding and creation of their surrounding environments. In the words of Shirley Ardener, "behaviour and space are mutually dependent" (sic) (12). Because Mrs Compton believes that the foremost requirement of a true lady is to "stay shut up" in the home (SF 169), she strictly limits her space to the interior of the domestic sphere. Her extreme adherence to these limits bor-
ders on spatial paralysis. Mrs Compson's inability to understand social norms and traverse space results in an unbalanced and one-sided view of the Southern lady and determines the restricted nature of her living space. She occupies the old Compson house, a “square, paintless house with its rotting portico” (194). The yard contains a “shabby garden” and a “broken fence” (188), and is “empty of all else that moved” (178). Inside the house “the quiet stairwell . . . descended into complete darkness” and “a gray window fell across it” (174). This description of dark, ruined, and static spaces has an intense gothic flavor that blends with descriptions of Mrs Compson’s appearance. Inside, she always wears “a dressing gown of quilted black satin” and holds it “close under her chin” (174); her overall appearance is black: even her eyes seem “so dark as to appear to be all pupil or all iris” (182). The gothic and estranged space, in turn, imposes restraints on her mobility: as Ardener notes “our perceptions of space are shaped by our capacity to move about, whether by foot or by mechanical or other transport” (12).

Mrs Compson spends most of her time lying on the bed in her room, which gives off “a pervading reek of camphor”; the curtains are mostly drawn so that her “room [is] in halflight” (SF 195). She shows no desire to alter her monotonous and constrained living space or to enhance her mobility. Seldom leaving her room or going downstairs to have dinner with the other family members, Mrs Compson justifies her immobility by thinking that “Quentin . . . and Mr Compson both feel a little insulted when I am strong enough to come down to the table” (63). She refuses to go to town and despises town life, claiming that she is “not like most people” (170). The only public space that she is willing to inhabit is the cemetery, a typical gothic space often associated with stasis, death, and depression. In the graveyard, Mrs Compson retains her black costume and adds a veil, separating herself visually from any possible contact with the outer world. Moreover, Mrs Compson's physical inertia and spatial immobility makes her dependent on men for motion and the fulfillment of her needs. She is averse to going to the cemetery without Roskus's company, and the only other time that she sets foot outside her home is when Herbert Head, her son-in-law, takes her out for a drive. Her physical immobility imposes a spatial paralysis, and in restricting her movements she has gradually transformed her home into a space of imprisonment.

Mrs Compson's excessive self-restraint and distorted sense of space lead to her isolation and sense of alienation from others. The severe limits of her personal space turn all her attention inward, so that she becomes completely absorbed in her own world, “forever melting in self-pity” (Sharma 133). The bed that she clings to day and night has become “the childbed, not the marriage bed, [with her] acting like a child, exacting from her children the sustenance she should be offering them” (Weinstein 31). Mrs Compson demands to be the center of her family's care and support and, when feeling neglected, attempts to attract their attention by claiming sickness. Her appearances are therefore always accompanied by her incessant cries, complaints, and ailments. Though she insists on her central position in the Compson family home, she differ-
entiates herself from the other housewives in town and hardly appears in the kitchen, the space typically representing motherhood in Southern literature. She turns "cold and querulous, with . . . eyes pouches and baffled" (182) and drifts progressively farther away from the image of the Southern lady, who is classically represented as tender, nurturing, considerate, and loving. Ironically, by blindly and ineffectually pursuing it, she has diminished the possibility for her to be identified with the Southern lady. Her assumption of the role of the Southern lady turns out to be an illusion; she deludes herself by playing the role morbidly, and in the process both loses herself and deviates from her original intention.

Mrs Compson’s limited spatial mobility contributes to and serves as an index of her gendered subordination; she is unable to understand the gendered power dynamics of the familial spaces that she navigates or, rather, fails to navigate. The domestic space of the household, like other spaces, is not merely "a physical backdrop, container, or stage to human life" (Soja 4), but "multiple fields of interaction created by social arrangements" (Gwin, Woman 8). The social arrangements within the house reflect the flow of conflicting powers. Gillian Rose argues that in patriarchal societies the home symbolizes the subordination of women, and for women "their ‘garden,’ bounded by its walls, was the home, which [is] described as a private, domestic, feminine space, quite separate from the male sphere of waged work and politics" (18).

The separate, gendered space distribution inside the Compson house, which is partly attributable to Mrs Compson’s self-imprisonment, constrains and weakens her execution of spatial power. Her manipulative behaviors “not only empower her but also keep her trapped in convention” (Nüssler 573). After Mr Compson dies, Jason becomes the patriarchal authority in the family, and Mrs Compson’s subordination and spatial restrictions are explicit. Though she still keeps the house keys, she has no access to Jason’s room because he has changed his lock; she claims that she has “never let anyone take [her] keys” (SF 183), but on the day Miss Quentin runs away, Jason even deprives her of the right to “find the key to a room in [her] own house” (184). In the latter part of the novel, Mrs Compson frequently tells Jason, “You are the head of it now” (169) and regards herself as “a trouble and a burden” (120) to him. She meekly surrenders to his domination in the familial space and her identity as the figurehead hostess collapses.

Mrs Compson’s behavior throughout the novel suggests her own compliance with and reinforcement of patriarchal social norms. She not only severely restricts her own living space, but also attempts to restrict the movements of other family members within the domestic space: she makes the house their jail, too, carrying with her “a huge bunch of rusted keys on an iron ring like a mediaeval jailer’s” (SF 183). This might partly explain why her son Quentin says that “the dungeon was Mother herself” (115). Mrs Compson builds a “place of the unconscious, where fear lives” (Gwin, Feminine 49) and attempts to imprison her family within it. Throughout the novel, Mrs Compson endeavors to deprive her family of mobility and keep them from escaping the fam-
ily home. In the opening pages, Mrs Compson twice attempts to stop Caddy and Benjy from going outside; she later confines Caddy’s daughter, Quentin, to the house by locking her in every evening. When going to the cemetery, Mrs Compson repeatedly tells Dilsey not to let Quentin out of the house.

Just as her own attempts to become a Southern lady are unsuccessful, Mrs Compson’s attempts to use physical containment as a means of enforcing ladylike manners in Miss Quentin also fail. Miss Quentin sneaks outside every night via the pear tree by her window after Mrs Compson locks her door, and her behavior is a known secret in the whole family—even Luster and Benjy are aware of it. The only person who is kept in the dark is Mrs Compson herself, the one presumably in control. Mrs Compson not only fails to exert her authority in her confrontations with Jason and Miss Quentin, but is also “a complete failure” as a mother (L. Wagner 52). The maternal space that she is supposed to occupy has been transformed into a destructive and threatening space. Most of the Compson house is as cold and dark as a tomb; the only warm and bright space is the kitchen, which is under Dilsey’s control, while the space associated with the maternal hostess is the depressing bedroom. Like the archetypal mother of myth, Mrs Compson plays the dual role of life-giver and devourer. Quentin’s almost hallucinatory memory of a childhood book is a true reflection of the Compson family:

When I was little there was a picture in one of our books, a dark place into which a single weak ray of light came slanting upon two faces lifted out of the shadow.... I’d have to turn back to it until the dungeon was Mother herself she and Father upward into weak light holding hands and us lost somewhere below even them without even a ray of light. (115)

Confining herself to an enclosed space and blocking her children’s access to the people and spaces around them, Mrs Compson finally triggers the complete breakdown of familial relationships.

II. Candace Compson: Spatial Exile and Identity Elimination

Spatial distribution, geographical experiences, and self-identity are closely associated with and influence one another (P. Wagner 7). The personal spatial experience can also be seen as a “symbolic system” (Crang 27) that reflects individual values. Candace Compson, the key female character in *The Sound and the Fury*, is a contradictory figure. She moves between different senses of space and is unable to achieve a balance between various conflicting values. Caddy’s irresolute space consciousness disturbs her identity construction, and this contributes to her vacillating and ambivalent attitude toward life.

Compared to Mrs Compson, Caddy possesses greater critical awareness of her spatial environment and attempts to challenge the boundaries that confine women in the novel. Her resistance manifests itself mainly before her marriage, when she is less influenced and dominated by patriarchal society. In her girlhood, Caddy exhibits a keen sense of different configurations of space: even the
slightest environmental changes do not elude her. On the night when Damuddy dies, for instance, when the children are kept from the truth and told to sleep in another bedroom instead of their grandmother’s, Caddy is the only one to register the spatial change. She points out that the room “is where we have the measles” (25), and when she realizes that their nighties and everything else are already transferred to this new room, she claims that “it’s like moving” (49).

Caddy’s spatial acumen reveals a deep concern about the surrounding environment that also manifests as a curiosity about unknown spaces. On the day that Damuddy dies, Caddy is the only one of the four Compson children who dares to climb the tree to look inside the house; when her brother Quentin begins to attend school Caddy demands to go as well so that she can also make use of this public space. Though Mrs Compson attempts to restrict and determine the spatial trajectory of Caddy’s life, Caddy vigorously asserts her independence through her command of her own personal space. When she plays games with her three brothers, she prefers to take the lead and be “the general,” consciously dominating the common sibling space. While the remembered illustration of the two jailers in the dark depresses and upsets Caddy’s brother Quentin, Caddy’s own response to the picture is a desire to “break that place open and drag them out and . . . whip them good” (115). Moreover, Caddy is to some extent capable of true mobility. In the opening of the novel, she takes Benjy out against Mrs Compson’s objections; following her marriage, she learns to drive after her husband buys her the first car in the town, moving through space in a way that challenges the norms not just of her gender but of her whole region.

In an interview with Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault contends that “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (“Space” 252). In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner reveals the importance for women to gain intelligence about the ways in which social power structures are embedded within and operate through space—both positively and negatively. In the Compson family, patriarchal power is exerted not only in the patterns of practical actions and spoken words, but also through silent gazes. Foucault points to the fact that “all power would be exercised solely through exact observation; each gaze would form part of the overall functioning of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 171). Caddy’s living space is filled with eyes watching over and trying to control her: Mrs Compson keeps Caddy under her control by setting Jason to spy on her; the pleading look of Quentin, Caddy’s brother, makes her stay at home and lose the last chance to reestablish her relationship with her boyfriend; even Benjy is able to make her “shrink[k] against the wall getting smaller and smaller” (82) by his furious stare.

The fact that Caddy does care about the gaze of others results in her valuing domestic space. Her inherent attachment to her family and conventional ideology leave her vulnerable to patriarchal controls. In the patriarchal society of the novel, the masculine occupies the privileged place of the “center,” while the feminine is subordinated to marginal spaces. The confinement of women to the domestic sphere is “both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a
social control on identity” (Massey, *Space* 179). Caddy attempts but ultimately fails to exert her agency over the spatial boundaries that circumscribe women and regulate stereotypically feminine behavior. Fettered by the familial space, Caddy’s life is largely controlled by the other family members, who contribute to the definition of her identity. In the Compson family, Caddy plays several female familial roles: to Mr and Mrs Compson, she is a daughter; to Benjy, she is a mother; to Quentin, she is a lover; and to Jason, she is a sister. These identities, however, are bestowed by other people: she is merely “a blank counter, an empty signifier, a name in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning” (Bleikasten 56). Caddy has no narrative voice in the novel; she is a lacuna, and her whole story is told through the discourses of the masculine members of her family. Her speech is so faint that we have to try to listen to her “beyond sound and syntax, between the lines” (Gwin, *Feminine* 47).

The ambivalence of Caddy’s identity and her use of space make her unable to maintain personal integrity and determine her own destiny. Faced with interventions from her family, she fails to make her own judgments and in crucial moments loses her autonomy in relationships, marriages, and the raising of her daughter. Her impuissance at these critical junctures foreshadows the tragedy of her future life. There are two important changes of space in Caddy’s life; both are the result of compromise and familial pressure, and both occur against her will. In the first instance, Caddy is sent to French Lick, which effectively ends her relationship with Dalton Ames; in the second, Mrs Compson refuses to let her return to Jefferson after her divorce. These changes, effected by others in her family, alter her spiritual geography and personal space and mark the dissolution of her self-identity. When Caddy is forced to go to French Lick, Quentin compares the sound of dragging Caddy’s empty trunks down the attic stairs to that of coffins, implying that the once vivacious and brave Caddy is now gone, entombed (63). While this move might have portended a positive future married life, the subsequent divorce forces a more profound spatial change by removing Caddy from her kinship networks and exiling her from her hometown. This familial banishment, coupled with Mrs Compson’s injunction on mentioning Caddy’s name, function as a means of eliminating her identity. Caddy and her name have been alienated and erased: she has become “caddie” when Benjy wanders on the golf links, and inside the Compson house the only aural evidence of her existence is the burning sound when Mrs Compson destroys the checks that Caddy mails to her daughter. No longer the one that everyone talks about, she becomes a being that cannot be mentioned: she is merely “that name” (131). Segregated from the family space that she values the most, Caddy loses her role as daughter, mother, and wife, with the result that she has not “even got a home” (139) but is reduced to a nameless ghost haunting her former spaces.

Feminist geographers put much weight on movement in space, and “the limitation of women’s mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been a crucial means . . . of subordination” (Massey, *Space* 179). After being exiled, Caddy’s mobility degenerates, especially when she is confronted by the
male characters in the novel. Caddy gives Jason fifty dollars for a chance to see her daughter Quentin, but when Jason drives with Miss Quentin to the corner where Caddy is waiting, he passes past her “like a fire engine” (135), only holding Miss Quentin to the window for a split second. Faced with Jason’s betrayal, Caddy can do nothing but vainly run after him. Caddy’s immobility thwarts her attempted reconstruction of the maternal space she once occupied, while the patriarchal order negates the possibility of retrieving her lost familial space. When Jason chastises Caddy by saying, “If you can’t stay on the horse you’ve got, you’ll have to walk” (134), he acknowledges the loss of mobility engendered by her displacement in the latter part of the novel. Compared to Jason, who is riding “on the horse,” Caddy can only “walk” weakly in the fast-moving patriarchal world, losing control of her life course as the novel progresses.

As noted in the 1945 “Appendix” to the novel, Caddy “accepted [her] doom without either seeking or fleeing it” (“Appendix” 263): once rejected by society, she drifts away and becomes marginalized. Caddy last appears in the sports car of a Nazi staff general: she looks “cold serene and damned” (“Appendix” 265). Because she is not its owner, the car does not render Caddy more mobile; the sports car—perhaps like Caddy herself—is the property of the male general, who is “yet another version of Jason” (Trouard 56). Still attached to and controlled by other people’s space, Caddy is more of a decoration than an equal. Her emotionless facial expression recalls her earlier declaration: “I’m bad and I’m going to hell, and I don’t care” (125). By this time, she truly does not care anymore. Perhaps the only person who still cares about and attempts to protect Caddy’s space is her little brother Benjy, who cherishes “the maternal space of Caddy” (Gwin, Feminine 41) that she creates for him during her girlhood. When Benjy discovers that the direction of their routine drive is altered and that the spatial environment is changed, he protests as strongly as he can in an attempt to maintain the integrity of the familiar space. He does not become quiet until he is reassured that the spatial order is reasserted, flowing “smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place” (SF 209), in the same way they flow at the opening of the novel: “The ones on the other side began again, bright and fast and smooth, like when Caddy says we are going to sleep” (9).

Caddy Compson could be seen as the most tragic among the three Compson women. In a departure from Mrs Compson, who is ignorant and willing to serve patriarchal society, Caddy tries but fails to contest the patriarchal order. She is “doomed and [knows] it,” which makes her loss of identity and personal space much more painful (“Appendix” 263). Ultimately, her attachment to her family (mainly Benjy and her daughter) and the attendant ideology is too strong for her to escape from the constraints of patriarchal space. The creation of Caddy reflects Faulkner’s larger intentions in writing The Sound and the Fury: “Now I can write. Now I can make myself a vase like that which the old Roman kept at his bedside and wore the rim slowly away with kissing it” (“An Introduction” 252). Perhaps Caddy Compson becomes what Faulkner wanted her to be: a property made by the masculine and clasped firmly in his hands; she is the vase kept at the
bedside inside the house, and once her connection with the conventional family space is cut off, she is doomed to become alienated and worn away.

III. MISS QUENTIN: SPACE ESCAPE AND OTHER’S NAME

Access to mobility is a fundamental structure in American fiction, and in *The Sound and the Fury* it is primarily a privilege possessed only by the male characters. Men can move freely among different spaces, while women are usually confined to limited ones. Mrs Compson and Caddy, though in different ways, are constrained in their mobility, especially in conflicts with Jason Compson, the symbol of patriarchal order. Miss Quentin—Caddy’s illegitimate daughter—functions differently with regard to space and mobility and often gets the upper hand when competing with male characters. There are two impressive scenes in the novel where Miss Quentin is pursued by her uncle Jason, and on both occasions she succeeds in eluding him, even causing Jason himself to become immobile. In the first instance, Miss Quentin lets the air out of the tires of Jason’s car and leaves him without a pump to inflate them, effectively immobilizing him while she drives off in triumph; later, after she has stolen his money, she so effectively loses him that he can no longer drive due to a headache and must hire someone to drive his car back to Jefferson. While Jason’s mobility is progressively constrained, Miss Quentin’s is increased. Even though she is not driving the car, she is in control of the driver and in this way escapes from the subordinated space to which females are relegated and assumes the privileged space occupied by the male. Her ability to take advantage of heightened mobility—a province of the masculine—further threatens patriarchal order in the novel. By surmounting spatial obstacles and traversing public spaces—traditionally areas controlled by men—Miss Quentin moves toward a more independent and less delimited identity than her mother or grandmother and sheds the constraints of the patriarchy.

Miss Quentin’s mobility enables her to move freely through the public and private spaces of the novel, and in so doing, expands her personal space considerably. Unlike Mrs Compson, Miss Quentin is not constrained by gendered spatial divisions or by the private/public dualism of Southern society. She is eager to amplify her gendered personal space and endeavors to explore the public spaces from which her female predecessors were excluded. In her childhood, she sneaks out of her locked room through the window every night, frustrating her grandmothers attempts to shape her conduct according to Southern codes of female restraint.

Miss Quentin also displays confidence and courage when faced with the privileged masculine space. Miss Quentin is the first member of the Compson family to gain access to Jason’s private room against his will, which she achieves by smashing the window. Conversely, Mrs Compson is powerless to penetrate Jason’s locked room and admits that no one can “ever go in there except Sunday, to clean it” (SF 181). Breaking Jason’s window shows Miss Quentin’s contempt for Jason and patriarchal authority, and allows her to destroy the gendered spa-
tial barriers that stand as symbols for masculine self-consciousness; she deter-
ritorializes the dualism of gendered spatial division. Her invasion of his space
affects Jason to such an extent that she appears in his nightmares even four
years after the burglary. In other words, Miss Quentin accomplishes “a double
invasion” into the masculine space: she not only transgresses the boundaries of
Jason’s physical space, but also violates his psychological space.

On the surface, Miss Quentin succeeds where Mrs Compson and Caddy
have failed, as she achieves a degree of independence in constructing her own
identity. However, mobility and invasion of space can only go so far in patri­
archal society and do not necessarily lead to the construction of an indepen­
dent identity; neither do they necessarily produce more familial power. Miss
Quentin grows up in a space from which both her parents are absent, and as
an illegitimate child she has no family name: all she has is the name of her
uncle, Quentin. In the eyes of the other Compson family members, she is mere­
ly a symbol of others. Because Caddy named her daughter after her deceased
brother Quentin, Mrs Compson always associates her granddaughter with her
son. Miss Quentin lives under the shadow of her dead uncle, a fact evidenced
when she runs away from home and Mrs Compson’s first response is to find
“the note,” because “Quentin left a note” before committing suicide (184). Just
as Mrs Compson always observes, “[l]ike uncle, like niece” (195), Faulkner’s
deliberate juxtaposition of the stories concerning the two Quentins makes the
association between them more prominent.

To Jason, Miss Quentin is also closely connected with her mother, thus
embodying all of his hatred for Caddy. Whitford points out that in the male
imagination women are often not differentiated, but merely “the other of the
same” (114). To Jason, Miss Quentin is “[j]ust like her mother” (141), and he
claims that she is doomed to share the same tragic fate as Caddy because “[o]
nce a bitch always a bitch” (119). He regards Miss Quentin not as an indepen­
dent person but as a commodity, part of a bargain. When Jason blackmails
Caddy, he degrades Miss Quentin to a single letter “Q” in his telegram (127);
she also is described as “a porcelain insulator” (168), seemingly independent at
first glance but finally isolated and fragile.

Miss Quentin’s difficulty in assuming a strong personal identity lies in
her inability to nurture interpersonal relationships, especially with her family
members. Her escape from the Compson house is, not surprisingly, a turning-
point in her life, marking the end of her dependent relationship with her fam­
ily. The separation from her familial space destroys her kinship networks and
has a destructive influence on her shaping of self-identity. Space is “the product
of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of
the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey, For Space 9). The Southern sense of
place, as Allen suggests, is tripartite, having namely “historical and social as
well as physical dimensions”; it occupies “a complex structure of both kinship
networks and landownership patterns” (152-53).

Interpersonal relationships based on space could be seen as the core of
the Southern sense of place. Miss Quentin attaches little value to familial space
and kinship networks, and she mentions repeatedly that she hates living in the Compson house and wishes to leave. Miss Quentin's contempt for family life differentiates her from Caddy's similar wish to leave home: while Caddy also claims that "[she]'ll run away and never come back" (13), her inextricable attachment to familial space prevents her from putting her words into practice. As Mrs Compson points out, Caddy has "enough regard for the family" (131), and that "regard" has become a fetter that binds Caddy's heart to her family. By comparison, to Miss Quentin the Compson house is merely an emotionless and physical space, an alienated world that she would by no means regard as her home.

Miss Quentin's segregation from the maternal space also functions as a destructive force in her identity construction. Due to her exiled mother's inability to provide her with affection and the other family members' outright disdain for her, it is not surprising that Miss Quentin can not feel the significance of familial space. From the moment Miss Quentin enters the Compson house as a baby, she causes a family argument regarding space: Mr. Compson and Dilsey hold the view that Miss Quentin's cradle should be set up in Caddy's "old room," while Mrs Compson insists that "that atmosphere" (131) will contaminate the baby. The argument ends with Miss Quentin's cradle being set up in her own room. Being separated from the space that stands for motherhood (Caddy's old room), Miss Quentin loses her connection with the maternal space from the very start of her life and falls under the control of Mrs Compson, who neglects maternal duties and forbids people mentioning Caddy's name at home; she even states that she would thank God if Miss Quentin "could grow up never to know that she had a mother" (131). Although Miss Quentin and Caddy correspond by mail, their letters mainly focus on money and do not seem to create a bond between mother and daughter. As Adrienne Rich has pointed out, "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (237). Losing the bond with her family, especially her mother, Miss Quentin's journey for an independent identity lacks a crucial link right from its beginning.

Miss Quentin is further unable to identify with a solid familial space. When people are not living in a fixed space, their sense of family and safety easily become unstable, even threatened, and their self-identity may be severely weakened due to a space that is too fluid (Wang 80). The "fluid" space constantly dissolves and unshapes Miss Quentin's identity, disturbing her journey to construct an independent self-identity. In fact, even before she escapes from the restraints of the Compson household, her presence in the familial space is unfixed: her bedroom appears to be neither "a girl's room" nor "anybody's room," but merely a space with the flavor of "anonymity" and "dead and stereotyped transience of rooms in assignation houses" (184). Even the scent of the blooming pear tree against her window seems to be "forlorn" and incompatible with the room (184). This "anonymous" bedroom reflects Miss Quentin's status in the family, indicating that she is no more than a casual tenant. As a dispensable member in the family, she does not belong to it and might leave at any moment.
At the end of the novel, Miss Quentin runs away from home by climbing down the pear tree outside her window. The blooming pear tree may be a symbol of desire, representing her yearning for an open, modern space with all its attendant temptations. Interestingly, in the appendix to the novel, Faulkner substitutes the pear tree with “a rainpipe” (269), and when the editors pointed to this discrepancy he stuck to the change, claiming that his book “is still alive after 15 years, and being still alive is still growing, changing” (SL 222). The rainpipe may suggest liquidity and mobility; because modernity is “a process of liquefaction from the start” (Bauman 2), the rain pipe may also be read as a symbol of modern industry, one that indicates a shift from the “old South” to a “new South” during the early twentieth century. The fact that Miss Quentin escapes from the conventional enclosed space of the Compson family home via the rain pipe may also imply the invasion of a liquid commodity economy into the closed plantation agriculture and the gradual disintegration of the old South. Global capitalism ushers in the decay of the old South, as historian Jack Kirby has argued; “Southern institutions, most obviously the aged scheme of labor-intensive farming, teetered on the brink of catastrophe” and “could not survive the 1930s” (50). These massive social transformations exerted destructive effects on the South’s social and economic structure: for the region, “the early twentieth century was a time of danger, of loss, of falling backward while the rest of the industrialized world sped by” (Kirby 49). Faulkner’s revision of “rain pipe” for “pear tree” may represent his anxiety about the negative influence of modern space on Miss Quentin and her journey to find out “who she is.” Would she succeed in constructing her own identity in the future, or would she become a wanderer in the rapidly changing world and disappear into anonymous modern spaces? Faulkner presents a story without a definite ending, because it is a story concerning the complicated spaces of modern society, and space “is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed” (Massey, For Space 9). Miss Quentin’s construction of self-identity, if successful, could not be static or singular, but an identity that is shifting, contingent, and multi-modal: it would be “fluid, open to dispute, lacking in stability” (Lilley 107). The shaping of self-identity and personal space can be seen to be like Faulkner’s description of The Sound and the Fury: “still alive [and] still growing, changing.”

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WORKS CITED


