

Reinterpreting the Man with the Red Tie to End *The Sound and the Fury*

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Abstract: Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* creates a chaotic but tolerant world for various kinds of voices and identities, in which the marginalized groups are allowed to enter in. The "boyfriend" of Miss Quentin, the man with the red tie might be one of them, who is more like a symbol instead of a real character. Inspired by the presumption that the showman wearing a red tie was probably a homosexual, this paper aims at reinterpreting his association with Jason Compson and Miss Quentin and the real end of this novel.

Keywords: *The Sound and the Fury*; The Red Tie; Homosexual

1. The Red Tie in the Twentieth-Century America

Historian Jonathan Ned Katz wrote a book that recorded plenty of documents dealing with lesbians and male homosexuals, and one source of these information was the accounts given by travelers, including the traveling showman^[2]. It proved that though homosexuality in America was not visible and conspicuous in public at that time, the deeply-rooted existence of lesbians and male homosexuals was certain. George Chauncey attributes the "myth of invisibility" of the gay world to the social convention that kept it invisible^[3].

In the 1930s and 1940s of America, the prevailing color of homosexual groups was red and inverts adopted a fashion for a red tie as the "badge" of their tribe^[5]. Besides, male prostitutes always wore red ties invariably and walked the streets of Philadelphia and New York^[5]. Chauncey also emphasized that wearing red ties was the most famous items of gay males' apparel and their announcements on "sexual inversion"^[3]. In an era of conservatives, a red tie symbolized "unorthodox tastes" of the marginalized inverts, and a man with red tie walking on the street of New York was very likely to be labeled as a gay^[3].

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the red tie wore by Miss Quentin's lover was merely regarded as a part of a traveling showman's uniform. However, there was no evidence to prove that the red tie was the standard requirements of a showman and the place where the man with red tie working certainly was a circus or carnival. During 1930s of America, wearing a red tie as a part of attire was not a convention for showmen or pitchmen working in the circus or carnival^[1]. The ambiguity of describing the details of the circus or carnival in the novel and calling it "that show"^[6] also announced the fault of taking a red tie for granted as a circus showman's costume.

2. The Red Tie in *The Sound and the Fury*

Four main characters in the novel had close relationships with homosexuality. They were either surrounded by gender confusion and influenced by homosexual orientation such as Benjy and Quentin or personally confronted with the homosexual with red tie like Jason Compson and Miss Quentin.

2.1 Gender Confusion Surrounding Quentin

As Benjy was unable to clearly memorize and describe people and events, his memory was messy and confused, making Quentin's gender identity ambiguous. When the plots progressed with Benjy across the boundaries of time and space, the gender of "Quentin" shifted from female to male, and then from male to female and thus caused confusion "[disrupting] the dichotomy of sexual difference"^[5]. These constant but seamless shifts between Benjy's brother Quentin Compson and his niece Miss Quentin increased the difficulty of identifying the gender of "Quentin", which was not only conformed to Benjy's image of a fool but shaped a "hermaphroditic Quentin"^[1]. The blurred distinction between Quentin and Miss Quentin indicated that "Quentin" referred to two genders at the same time, and it could be considered as a gay male with feminine nature or a lesbian with masculine nature. This was the first occurrence of gender-bending in the novel that combined Quentin with homosexuality.

Then in the Quentin's section, the gender confusion continued and became more apparent. Quentin seemed to have an abnormally intimate relationship with Shreve MacKenzie, his roommate at Harvard. When one of Quentin's classmates teasingly called Shreve "husband"^[6] of Quentin, Shreve and even Quentin himself did not fight with the rumor monger and protect their reputation, instead, they

“let him alone” [6]. Conceivably, Quentin and Shreve were as thick as thieves so much that they were mistaken for a gay couple. When asked by Gerald Bland’s mother to remove from Quentin’s room, Shreve recalled this rumor and complained the “cruel fate” that departed them and banteringly promised “never [to] love another” [6]. In addition, when Quentin and Shreve were sitting in Mrs. Bland’s car, Shreve touched Quentin’s knee twice and Quentin silently moved his knee twice [6], which was more like sexual suggestions between gays instead of simple accident or friendly behaviors. It was possible that Shreve and Quentin were a homosexual couple.

Apart from the homosexual inclination, Quentin possessed stronger femininity than masculinity. Although Quentin attempted to act like a man, he failed in both the realm of sexual conquest and manly fighting. During Quentin’s short lifetime, he had no love affairs with women and remained a virgin until his suicide though American Southern males would be “ashamed of being a virgin” [6]. As a traditional Southern American who took family honor seriously and even fabricated incestuous rumors to cover up Caddy’s loss of virginity, Quentin was not bothered by this embarrassment and exerted no effort to achieve sexual conquest. Instead, he was preoccupied by the idea of fighting bravely against offenders and proving his masculinity, obviously more challenging than sexual conquest.

Unfortunately, Quentin also suffered a crushing defeat in the realm of fighting. Quentin swore to kill Dalton Ames who defiled his beloved sister Caddy. Nevertheless, when confronted with Ames who “put the pistol in [Quentin’s] hand” [6] Quentin lacked the courage to shoot him. Instead of shooting Ames to death as he imagined before, he just bluffed to order Ames to leave the town and then “passed out like a girl” [6] on account of overwhelming fear. Even at the time when Quentin gathered the courage to fight with Bland, his first reaction was to “hit him [his] open hand” [6] like a female instead of clenching his hand and punching Bland down. As a result, the sexual orientation of feminized Quentin was more inclined to homosexuality.

Although Quentin seemed to violate the principles of homosexuality by declaring his intimacy with Caddy, this incest taboo was purely imagined by Quentin to shield away from the real facts of his sister’s unchastity and to preserve Compson’s nobility. Therefore, he did not practically transgress “the prior taboo” against homosexuality^[1]. Different from the ambiguous homosexual features in Quentin, the homosexuality of the man with red tie was more certain and obvious.

2.2 Jason’s Detestation of the Red Tie

Jason frequently visited the grubby places in large cities like Memphis where prostitutes such as his girlfriend Lorraine lived. Although there were no descriptions about his encountering with male prostitutes, gay men with red ties were very likely to be the part of the sexual workers in the large cities of twentieth-century America. Chances were that Jason already knew the symbolized meaning of the red tie before he met Miss Quentin’s “lover” with red tie. Moreover, comments Jason made on the man with red tie also alluded to his knowledge of the homosexual indication of the red tie. At his first meeting with this showman, Jason instantly noticed the red tie the man had on and remarked that it must belonged to a “hell kind of man” [6]. Witnessing Miss Quentin’s escape with this man, Jason was outraged at the first sight of “red” and “the red tie” and even “forgot about everything” [6]. Apparently, the red tie was more noticeable, wicked and unforgivable than the male identity of man himself. For Jason, being “laughed at by a man that would wear a red tie” [6] was more humiliating and disgraceful than being tricked by his niece or an ordinary man. Jason’s insistence of associating the red tie with this showman indicated that the red tie must had some certain special meaning for him, more precisely, for a traditional southern American.

The feminine insults Jason hurled at the man wearing red tie certainly confirmed homosexuality of this showman. Whenever Jason talked with women, he always used the “abnormal spelling of a common expletive”, that is, he used “dam” which meant “a domesticated female animal” or “a bitch” rather than the word “damn” with the meaning of going to hell^[1]. When struggling with the black female Dilsey, Jason described her “dam nearly naked” [6]; when scolding his niece Miss Quentin, Jason cursed her a “dam little slut”; when talking with his sister Caddy, he criticized her for not “[giving] a dam about anybody” [6]. However, the abnormal expletive was not exclusive to females but also applied to the man with red tie. Jason declared twice that the man who wore a red tie must be “a dam man” [6] and swore to make the showman aware that “dam red tie [was] the latch string to hell” [6]. It exposed not only his detestation of and disdain for this showman but his malice for framing the male owner of the red tie as a bitch, which was usually an insult to homosexuals.

Thus, Jason’s motivation for chasing Miss Quentin and her gay “lover” seemed to wear a mysterious veil. Admittedly, Jason’s rage for Miss Quentin had to do with his morbid fascination with money and her act of stealing money, but it was largely dependent on his failure in preserving Compson family fame. The homosexual identity of this showman almost determined that Miss Quentin had no sexual relationship with him. Thus, Jason’s motivation for running after his niece was to stop Miss Quentin’s disgraceful escape from tarnishing Compson’s family name and especially his name by associating with a marginalized gay man. In the 1920s and 1930s, “inverts” were excluded from main stream American society and represented abnormality and degeneration^[3]. Upon discovering that Miss Quentin took

his money with an invert's assistance, Jason was haunted by the social stigma attached to homosexuality and his personal shame of being humiliated by not only a "female animal" and but a homosexual worse than a female. Even worse, Jason lost his masculine power in the process of retrieving the stolen money. Before Miss Quentin's escape, Jason certainly had held the highest position and masculine power in Compson family. In the process of chasing, no one was willing to help Jason take the money back, that is, no one admitted his social rank and assisted Jason to "re-establish his order" over Miss Quentin and a gay man ^[1]. Ultimately, the Red Tie destroyed Jason's former domination and deprived his masculine power.

2.3 Miss Quentin's Escape with the Red Tie

Miss Quentin's final escape with a man were widely acknowledged as following her mother Caddy's disastrous tragedy, or a more degenerative version. Similar to Caddy, Miss Quentin was reckless of personal life and always hung out with men in daylight. Though not value her virginity, Caddy worried about the influence of her shameful misconduct on her family, and thus she repented and swore she "wont anymore, ever" ^[6] when caught with Charlie. Miss Quentin was more careless of sexual issues and morals, and fearlessly announced that she would rather "be in hell" and "dare anybody to know everything [she] do" when caught with the showman ^[6]. Miss Quentin's barefaced attitude seemed to confirm that she repeated Caddy's mistakes and was doomed to degenerate into prostitution.

However, given the homosexual identity of the man with red tie, the above speculations were completely overturned. Miss Quentin was unlikely to fall in love with a homosexual and involved in a sexual relationship with a gay male. This might be the real reason why Miss Quentin dared anybody to know their association for that she was not engaged in any immoral affairs. Instead of being trapped in the cycle of degeneration, the liberal-minded Miss Quentin escaped with a gay man belonging to a stigmatized minority and victoriously broke the cycle with her untethered spirit. Unlike Caddy who had no alternative but to surrender to men and commit "unchastity" to resist the patriarchy, deserving critic and sharp condemnation, Miss Quentin's chaste and courageous escape with a homosexual was more admirable and rebellious, liberating her anti-conventional spirit without damage on feminine body. She actually achieved her rebellion against patriarchy without sacrificing chastity. It was probably the least damaging way Faulkner could think of for powerless mild women to fight against patriarchal dominance in the conservative Southern American society.

The cultural force of the red tie was so powerful and unconventional that even the creator endeavored to bury its existence. Though the novel was full of blurring of sexual boundaries, Faulkner had attempted to erase the existence of homosexuality in *The Sound and the Fury*. In the Compson Appendix, in order to deny the homosexuality of the showman, Faulkner made "the pitchman" under sentence for "bigamy" which definitely assured his heterosexuality ^[6]. One thing that stood out was that this showman was called "the man with the red tie" without any further explanations throughout the whole story, while in the Appendix Faulkner no longer mentioned his previous code name but called him "pitchman". This tactic not only exposed Faulkner's intention of "[eliminating] the badge of homosexuality" ^[1] and reinforcing the heterosexuality of the showman, but revealed his acknowledgement of the cultural meaning carried by the Red Tie, and maybe concealment of his original design. The sexual orientation of the man with red tie was altered to transform Miss Quentin's escape into a repetition of Caddy's tragedy, that is, to generate another "Miss Quentin" to continue the Compson family, which might be the result of Faulkner's secret sympathy for the Southern American aristocratic family.

3. Conclusion

After penetrating Faulkner's original homosexual design for the man with red tie, though many questions still remained unsolved, the whole story was able to come to a hopeful conclusion and Compson family came to a real end. Knowing that neither Jason or Benjy would have children, Quentin was the only hope for bearing a Compson's descendant and continuing Compson line, otherwise Compson family would vanish with their name. Miss Quentin's escape with a gay predicted the doom of Compson family. But promisingly, the homosexual orientation of the man with red tie and his potential pure relationship with Miss Quentin transformed their escape from the daughter of Caddy's destined sufferings into a meaningful fight for liberty, a young woman's successful flee from a collapsed, dysfunctional family. It was not the stolen money from Jason that liberated Miss Quentin from the exploitation of patriarchy, but the gay with red tie that helped to achieve her own redemption and established totally new human relations. Miss Quentin's courageous escape with a homosexual signaled her departure from old order of Compson family and entrance into an entirely new order.

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