

From Southern Belles to Hell on Wheels: Mothers and Daughters in Faulkner and O'Connor

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In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and many of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, mothers serve as some of the most prominent and divisive characters. Their behavior may be maddening at times, but these are women living without a clear blueprint of what it means to be a woman in the South. Faulkner's novel takes place primarily ten years after the end of World War I, while O'Connor's short stories deal with post-World War II women. The old ideal of the Southern lady—who is judged by her family name, social standing, economic status, and the outward appearance of propriety—has faded into obscurity. Yet the more modern, Southern woman—who is strong, independent, and responsible for her own land and finances—has not yet found acceptance in Southern society.

Both of these maternal types are ill-equipped to raise children in this evolving Southern climate. They are either clinging to a past that no longer exists, or trying to navigate a new course in a world that has not yet accepted their changing roles. In both cases, their children are left to fend for themselves in determining what their own places as Southerners—and women—will be.

Mrs. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* is the quintessential example of the pre-war Old South, while several (but not all) of O'Connor's widows and mothers represent a new, post-war Southern woman. Literary scholar Ulrike Nussler offers a scathing assessment of the Compson matriarch in *American Studies*:

Mrs. Compson's pseudo-aristocratic values are based on the ideal of "true womanhood" and give her the power to manipulate others through such attitudes as rigidity, physical immobility, bigotry, and neglect of maternal duties. This behavior creates a considerable,

perhaps even destructive, degree of tension that is intensified by the fact that her values not only empower her but also keep her trapped in convention. Thus, she fails to see objectively and contributes to the disintegration of her own family in the changing socio-economic circumstances of the early twentieth century (573).

Mrs. Compson is a woman who has fallen victim to her times. As Nussler points out, as a white upper-class woman, she has lived all her life as a member of a sheltered group that was traditionally dominated and protected by men. As the South itself began to slowly and reluctantly change, Mrs. Compson and women like her were left adrift. "She remains," Nussler states, "bound to the place that society once assigned her (574)." The family's once-grand plantation house is falling into disrepair and, after Mr. Compson's death, the financial situation continues to plummet. Mrs. Compson is unequipped to do anything but remain dependent on the men in her life—her thieving brother, Benjamin, and conniving son, Jason—while also failing to serve as any kind of role model to her daughter, Caddy. Despite all evidence to the contrary, she clings to the notion that her maiden name, Bascomb, still stands for something.

Even before her husband's death, Mrs. Compson seemed to relish the role of victim and embraced her perceived helplessness. Her self-worth is inextricably linked with her romantic notions of Southern aristocracy and social norms, to the point where she simply cannot function when her status is taken from her. With the birth of her "idiot" son, Benjy, and her husband's alcoholism, she feels entitled to act the martyr and seek sympathy and protection from all around her. In stark contrast to the family's African-American housekeeper, Dilsey, who has no social standing as a black woman but possesses natural maternal instincts and the ability to run the household, Mrs. Compson takes to her bed and relies on her mystery illness to excuse her from functioning in daily life.

The only overt action she takes as a parent is to sell Benjy's pasture so her other son, Quentin, can attend Harvard. Her displaced sense of family pride leads her to believe this is the best thing she can do for him, as public perception of his Ivy League education will, she thinks, return the Compsons to some of their former glory. With this action, she demonstrates her complete oblivion to Quentin's mental state or real needs. Even after his suicide at Harvard, she remains clueless as to what the cause for it may have been, never considering she had anything to do with it. However, as Stephen Ross points out in *Studies in the Novel*, Quentin's "romantic notions of honor and chastity can be traced to his mother's constant harping on respectability (253)."

Caddy, meanwhile, is left to fill the maternal void left by her mother's incompetence. She serves as a symbol of strength and love to her family members, most notably Quentin and Benjy. This position also leaves her with a desperate need to escape from the family and its expectations and limitations. Ironically, the way Caddy ends up slipping the bondage of her family's rigid adherence to status and decorum is by becoming a mother herself: a role in which she is destined to fail.

She ignores the dictates about ladylike behavior by engaging in forbidden sexual trysts and becoming pregnant, necessitating a hurried marriage of convenience to a man who is not the baby's father. Her rejection of societal expectations ends disastrously, as there is no place in Southern culture at that time for a woman who has a child on her own or disgraces the family name. Her choices contribute to the mental breakdown of her brother Quentin, who is unable to reconcile his love for Caddy with the idea that her purity has been compromised.

Without such a weak and ineffective mother who failed to exemplify how a woman might function in the New South, Caddy might have met a completely different fate. She possessed the potential to embody a new model of Southern womanhood, given her strength, fierce independent streak, and rejection of the social and moral restrictions placed on women like her mother. Instead, she simply rebelled against the concept of Southern lady-hood without direction and any sense of how she might find a place for herself in the post-World War I South.

Flannery O'Connor, on the other hand, is most often associated with matriarchs who embody the characteristics of the stronger, more independent woman. Often widowed or divorced, these women have been forced to play the part of head of household. They are responsible for managing the family's often dwindling finances, overseeing land and employees, and—almost as a side note—raising children. In several cases, they encounter outsiders who challenge their family dynamic. Tony Magistrale, in *Journal of American Studies*, points out, “O'Connor fashioned most of her characters, regardless of their philosophical orientation or environmental background, from fragmented families, wherein they are either the only child or the sole parent” (111). By taking male characters out of the traditional family structure, O'Connor challenges her female protagonists to perform in ways that are unexpected and for which they often seem ill-prepared.

Characters who fall into this category include Mrs. Cope in “A Circle in the Fire” and Mrs. Hopewell in “Good Country People.” Mrs. Cope, who might be admired for maintaining her property as a single mother, instead is universally resented and finds no respect from anyone. Rather than play the role of helpless victim, she has made the best of her situation and gone to work in a way that would be unthinkable for someone like Mrs. Compson.

However, in typical O'Connor fashion, even this is presented with irony to show how Mrs. Cope can't really cope with her responsibility as overseer. "'Every day I say a prayer of Thanksgiving,' Mrs. Cope said. 'Think of all we have. Lord,' she said and sighed, 'we have everything,' and she looked around at her rich pastures and hills heavy with timber and shook her head as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back" (136). She simultaneously recognizes all she has, realizes she must be grateful for it and hints that it might, in fact, be more burden than blessing. This is not a role she has chosen, and O'Connor suggests that Mrs. Cope may feel the weight of having "everything," yet she perseveres in this position and finds pride in it: "I have the best kept place in the county and do you know why? Because I work. I've had to work to save this place and work to keep it" (137). In trying to convince others of her success at saving the farm and making it run smoothly, she may in fact be trying to convince herself that her efforts have been worthwhile.

In taking on this traditionally male role, Mrs. Cope has alienated both the men who work for her and her own daughter; and she is at a loss when a band of misfit boys, led by the son of a former farm hand and hoping to spend the day riding horses, arrive at her property. When her hired man, Culver, chooses to go around the gate rather than get down off the tractor to open it, she berates him for "going the long way around at her expense" (135). She is met with quiet resistance from Culver and remarks, "'It's nothing to them... They don't have the responsibility'" (136). While it may be possible that Culver would respond the same way to a white male giving him such orders, it is reasonable to surmise that – for a black man – being reprimanded by a white woman adds an extra layer of complication. The power paradigm still dictated that he act in a subservient role and follow her orders, but Mrs. Cope senses Culver's sullen lack of

enthusiasm as a challenge to her position as a strong, single woman acting in a place of leadership.

When the three boys arrive at the farm, Mrs. Cope is utterly incapable of handling the situation. She seems caught between two traditional gender norms: the masculine role as head of household that she has been working so hard to establish, and the feminine role as maternal figure that she tries ineffectually to employ in dealing with the boys. Her half-hearted attempts at providing them with food and imploring them to act like gentlemen only increase their disdain, while her efforts to act as disciplinarian go completely unheeded.

The unintended but enormous consequence of this—in addition to the potentially disastrous fire on her property—is the erosion of her relationship with her daughter, Sally Virginia. According to Magistrale, this dynamic is common in O'Connor's work: "O'Connor's single parents are usually widowed mothers with one child. The writer's widows and widowers are steely, independent types who somehow manage to hold their homes and farms together, but often at the expense of understanding and aiding in the development of their children" (111).

The girl, at the cusp of womanhood, is frustrated with her mother's lack of action when it comes to dealing with the intruders. "'Listen,'" she tells her mother, "'I could handle them quicker than that'" (149). In return, Mrs. Cope is horrified by Sally Virginia's behavior. Her desire to confront the boys herself is rebuked by Mrs. Cope, who seems to become suddenly aware of the risks of being a woman in a still male-dominated world.

Her inability to take on an authoritative role seems mocked when Sally Virginia comes downstairs dressed as a man: The child “had put on a pair of overalls over her dress and had pulled a man’s old felt hat down as far as it would go on her head and was arming herself with two pistols in a decorated holster that she had fastened around her waist” (154). Mrs. Cope’s reaction is one of not just exasperation, but also of something deeper. “‘Why do you have to look like an idiot? ... What’s going to become of you?’” (154).

Despite the fact that she is a hard worker and an independent businesswoman, Mrs. Cope still clings to some idea of Southern womanhood and propriety. She represents the South in flux; she serves as a kind of bridge between Old and New, but doesn’t quite belong to either world and has no idea of what to make of her daughter. She literally does not know what is to become of Sally Virginia, as she has no concept of what a Southern woman of the future might resemble. For her part, Sally Virginia is not inspired by her mother’s relative independence, but simply angered by her ambivalence. She is lacking a role model that is either clearly ladylike and passive or independent and action-oriented. As a result, she enters adolescence with a confused picture of what womanhood should look like.

Another example of this mother-daughter dynamic in O’Connor’s writing is Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter Joy (or Hulga, as she prefers to be called) in “Good Country People.” Mrs. Hopewell, a single mother, is capable of running her household and farm, and of supervising her employees, the Freemans. In many ways, she is similar to Mrs. Cope and also clings to Southern ideals of ladylike behavior, despite her outward appearance of independence.

When referencing the Freemans, “Mrs. Hopewell liked to tell people that Glynesse and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs.

Freeman was a *lady* and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet (178)." In her professed admiration of Mrs. Freeman, she is demonstrating an attachment to the Old South with both its emphasis on being a lady and its adherence to a social hierarchy. Mrs. Hopewell employs Mrs. Freeman, and is therefore her superior, but thinks herself beyond old-fashioned social constructs because she would deign to introduce Mrs. Freeman to others. As much as she may be trying to deny this old structure, her awareness of and acknowledgment of it hints at her tacit acceptance of it.

When the outrageously named Bible salesman Manley Pointer appears, Mrs. Hopewell does not see the danger he presents. Like Mrs. Cope, her position as head of household is tempered and constricted by her obligations to Southern etiquette. Whereas her daughter bluntly advises her to "get rid of the salt of the earth" (188) so they can carry on with their meal, Mrs. Hopewell is incapable of doing so. Her good manners will simply not allow it. According to Peter Smith in *The Southern Literary Journal*:

In fact, these characters [Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Hopewell], as well as other O'Connor characters in similar positions, do not really deny their femininity, they exploit it, sometimes to the point that they seem to be parodying it. And they should arouse in most readers not only sympathy but also a grudging respect. Unlikable as these women may appear, all deserve credit for employing a clever strategy in attempting to survive in a man's world while essentially manless, and all deserve sympathy because they are faced with an impossible task in having to synthesize aspects of both gender roles in order to maintain their livelihoods (35).

Joy-Hulga, meanwhile, might be viewed as Mrs. Cope's worst fear of what could become of Sally Virginia. Ungraceful, intellectual, lacking in all Southern graces, she has all of the independence of her mother but none of her interpersonal skills. As Louise Westling points out in *Twentieth Century Literature*, this is a familiar theme for O'Connor:

In at least six of O'Connor's thirty-one published stories, the plot centers on a mother resembling Mrs. Hopewell and a daughter like Joy. The mother is a hardworking widow who supports and cares for her large, physically marred girl by running a small farm. The daughter is almost always bookish and very disagreeable. The mother is devoted to her nevertheless, but with an attitude of exasperated bafflement at her perversity and oddness (510-11).

Similar to Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Hopewell is unsure of what to make of her daughter, and her fondest wish is that Joy-Hulga had never acquired her PhD. In her view, Joy-Hulga's education represents a renunciation of Southern womanly values that has left her alone and unhappy; she has taken independence to an extreme that is beyond her mother's comprehension.

Westling further states:

There are no satisfactory solutions to the difficulties faced by widows like Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Hopewell and by daughters like Sally Virginia and Joy-Hulga. The widows can only try to live piously and hold tightly to their farms by struggling to perform a man's job...For the daughters there seems to be no useful function and no hope. As fat, bespectacled girls or as crippled adults, they have none of the feminine beauty or charm which might have helped them find a normal place in Southern life (517-18).

Indeed, Joy-Hulga has done nothing with her educational accomplishments, and seems to be completely without direction. She possesses her doctoral degree, yet still lives with her mother. She spurns the idea of romantic love and the perceived subjugation to men that it involves, yet is vulnerable enough to fall for the Bible salesman's advances. Like Caddy, she has the desire to assert herself as an independent woman unshackled from the bonds of Southern ladylike behavior, but has no idea how to actually pursue this path. She knows only that she does not wish to follow in her mother's footsteps and accept her rigid ideas about "good country people."

All three of these mothers—Mrs. Compson, Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Hopewell—seem almost doomed to fail as parents as a result of their circumstances. As a result, their daughters have no one to look to as a new ideal of Southern womanhood. Beyond rejecting what they see as a Southern way of life that is dying or irrelevant, the young women do not know exactly what they should do. Set out on a boyish, but ultimately pointless, adventure of the imagination, such as Sally Virginia? Seek solace in books and degrees, but fail to achieve any type of human connection, like Joy-Hulga? Flaunt convention in daring, forbidden, but unfulfilling trysts, such as Caddy?

Like their mothers, the daughters fall victim to the changing roles and expectations of the South. They are neither ladylike nor independent, neither protected by men nor competent to function alone. As readers, we can only wonder if these mothers (or their children) will be able to synthesize these competing norms to someday find that elusive happy medium of womanhood.

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