The Sister Figure and “Little Sister Death” in the Fiction of William Faulkner

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One of the greatest difficulties in any study of William Faulkner's fiction lies in the setting of limits. The sheer bulk of the material to be considered was intimidating even before Joseph Blotner added approximately eight pounds to it; still, the only viable approach to Faulkner seems to be one which takes into consideration, implicitly at least, the full scope of his fiction, then focuses upon an area narrow enough to be handled in the time/space allotted. This paper will attempt a brief categorization of Faulkner's fictional women, focusing upon that group which represents his most memorable and characteristic female: the Sister figure, along with her alteridentity, Little Sister Death.

Such a study of William Faulkner's world and its people must begin with recognition that it is, from first to last, a man's world. From the most imposing plantation house to the meanest sharecropper's shack, from mountains to flatlands, in towns and hamlets and piney woods, it is The Man, the white man, whose control is absolute. The white men of Yoknapatawpha (like their counterparts throughout the South) exercise the Divine Right of their caste. The white female is used and exploited or tolerated and pampered, depending upon whether she is a woman or a lady, but in neither case is she considered to be of any real importance.

In Faulkner's world it is the men who build towns and railroads and personal empires, who fight gallantly and drink hugely, who race horses and fly planes, commit crimes and prosecute criminals, who rob and cheat and Lynch, or who behave nobly and hunt great beasts in the vanishing wilderness. The women do a lot of waiting. We see them clearly only in their relationships with men. The key role for woman is, of course, submission. She is servant, sister, mother, friend, wife or mistress to The Man, keeping his home clean and his bed warm, but having no independent identity. Her role is reflected in the expressed attitude of Faulkner's men toward Womankind, an amazed and amused tolerance.
“Because women are wonderful; it doesn’t really matter what they want or if they themselves even know what it is they think they want.”1 (Gavin Stevens) “They lead beautiful lives, women. Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably excommunicated from, all reality.”2 (Jason Compson, Sr.) “You’ve got to make allowance for women anyhow. Different from men. Born contrary; complain when you don’t please ’em and complain when you do.”3 (Harry Mitchell)

The only truly dominant Faulkner females are postmenopausal. Having survived the years of male domination, his women may gain extraordinary strength of character to become Managers, or slip into the limbo of Nuisances or Ciphers. Younger women may be designated as Sister figures, Primal females, and Utility figures, and though few characters fit totally into one category, there are none after Soldiers’ Pay in whom one set of characteristics does not predominate.

The Primal is serene, bovine, bemused; the body type is constant: a certain mammalian meatiness; including such seemingly diverse figures as Genevieve Steinbauer (Mosquitoes), Eula Varner Snopes (The Hamlet, The Town), and Lena Grove (Light in August). Faulkner’s Utility females might also be called Victims, since these groupings are posited solely on the basis of their members’ primary relationships with white adult males. These are the women who serve The Man in one way or another, are used by him, but may never hope for a meaningful human or social relationship with him. All young black women belong to this set, as well as such characters as Emmy (Soldiers’ Pay), Laverne Schumann (Pylon), and Ruby Goodwin (Sanctuary). Frequently the Utility female is stocky, a little masculine, with blunt coarse hands and manners to match.

Among younger women, the third grouping is the one most central to Faulkner’s writing: the Sister figure, complex and uniquely Faulknerian. The strongest emotional attachment to females which Faulkner’s men are likely to feel is not to mother, not to wife or mistress, but to their sisters. Since sisters are the breeders

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of the future they must be kept pure, their “honor” guarded at all costs. In Faulkner’s South there is nothing more important than honor, and it subsists principally in three intangibles—the sanctity of the Man’s word as his bond, the unblemished nature of his courage, and the virgin purity of the woman chosen to bear his legitimate children. Her role as breeder, or potential breeder, determines a woman’s status in the circumscribed world of Yoknapatawpha County. Through the bearing of children to carry on his name, she gains her only real power over The Man.

Among female characters, concern for honor is one of those traits which seems to appear only after menopause. It is always the brother of the virgin, never the virgin herself, who fears for her loss of maidenhood. Occasionally the role of brother is undertaken by a male who is not a sibling, the decisive factor being the possessive and protective attitude, and the air of highly structured intimacy which, pushed to its limit, can suggest incest.

Both Margaret Powers and Cecily Saunders are Sister figures in Faulkner’s first novel, but it is in Mosquitoes that the image is exploited most candidly. Since the lengthy verbalization and less subtle approach of this novel help in establishing the Sister concept, it will be considered first.

The Sister is necessarily virginal, just as Faulkner’s Manager is necessarily indomitable. Her body-type might be described as a combination of the women of John Held and Aubrey Beardsley, both of whom Faulkner admired. His own early drawings\(^4\) show the strong influence of both men, and while he seems to have fancied Beardsley more, his talent was of the Held variety. Lean and epicene. These are key words for the Sister figure.

The sculptor Gordon, in Mosquitoes, is able to fashion for himself an ideal Sister figure, one who does not change, and who cannot betray him, for the very good reason that she is made of marble.

As you entered the room the thing drew your eyes: you turned sharply as to a sound, expecting movement. But it was marble, it could not move . . . motionless and passionately eternal—the virginal breastless torso of a girl,

\(^4\) Information concerning Faulkner’s brief career as an illustrator, including sample drawings from various University of Mississippi publications, may be found in William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry, compiled and introduced by Carvel Collins.
headless, armless, legless, in marble temporarily caught and hushed yet passionate still for escape, passionate and simple and eternal in the equivocal derisive darkness of the world.  

Gordon asserts, with almost frightening candor, “This is my feminine ideal: a virgin with no legs to leave me, no arms to hold me, no head to talk to me.” This marble virgin is the prototype for all Sister figures to follow.  

Ernest Talliaferro, one of the Faulkner males who is more talker than doer, says, “Do you see what he has caught? ... The Spirit of youth, of something fine and hard and clean in the world: something we all desire until our mouths are stopped with dust.’” The novelist, Fairchild, compliments Gordon on his marble virgin:

“I see that you too have been caught by this modern day fetish of virginity. But you have this advantage over us: yours will remain inviolate without your having to shut your eyes to its goings-on. You don’t have to make any effort to keep yours from being otherwise. Very satisfactory. And very unusual. The greatest part of man’s immolation of virginity is, I think, composed of an alarm and a suspicion that someone else may be, as the term is, getting it.”

The kind of desire which males feel for the Sister figure is very different from that which is felt for a Primal female—it is more spiritual, less specifically carnal. Mrs. Maurier’s niece, Patricia Robyn, is the living embodiment of Gordon’s virgin in all but its most salient characteristic—Patricia is intensely alive and beyond the control of any man. Like all of Faulkner’s Sister figures she is utterly indifferent to the men who try to protect her and keep her as she is. In addition to her real brother, Josh, Patricia has two admirers who are strong brother figures—the artist Gordon, and a young steward on the Nausikaa. “Gordon examined with growing interest her flat breast and belly, her boy’s body which the poise of it and the thinness of her arms belied. Sexless, yet somehow vaguely troubling. Perhaps just young, like a calf or a colt.”

Because Patricia is the first complete embodiment of the Sister,
and because her traits and characteristics are echoed throughout Faulkner's fiction, we will examine male characters' reactions to her in some detail.

... The sweet young curve of her shanks straight and brittle as the legs of a bird and ending in the twin inky splashes of her slippers.\(^{10}\) ... the clean young odor of her, like that of young trees ... her slim shape and the impersonal revelation of her bare sexless knees.\(^{11}\)

The odor of trees is a recurrent association with the Sister, almost as much a part of her as her virginity and her epicenity. It is Benjy, of course, who makes the attribute most memorable, in the passionate simplicity of his Sister memories: "Caddy smells like trees." The thin arms and straight "brittle" legs are typical. Much attention is paid to these "sexless" legs, whereas legs are seldom emphasized in descriptions of the Primal female. Patricia, like most members of her Set, is flat-chested. When she first sees Gordon's marble virgin, this exchange takes place:

She said irrelevantly, "Why hasn't she anything here?" Her brown hand flashed slimly across the high unemphasis of the marble's breast, and withdrew. "You haven't much there yourself." She met his steady gaze steadily. "Why should it have anything there?" "You're right," she agreed with the judicial complaisance of an equal. "I see now. Of course she shouldn't. I didn't quite—quite get it for a moment."\(^{12}\)

Gordon's attitude toward Particia is, overtly at least, that of a big brother. On one occasion he takes her across his knee and spanks her, because he thinks she is behaving badly. The reveries of which she is a part, however, are not entirely brotherly.

Although Fairchild does not become particularly involved with Patricia, he makes some comments, during one of the many pregnant conversations aboard the Nausikaa, which help to point up the difference between Faulkner's Sister and Primal figures. Presumably he is contrasting the kind of woman then in vogue with older fashions, but both kinds of women exist in Faulkner's fiction; there are even both kinds aboard the yacht.

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 17.  
\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 19.  
\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 21.
"Their strange sexless shapes, you know," he went on. "We, you and I, grew up expecting something beneath a woman's dress. Something satisfying in the way of breasts and hips and such. But now—Do you remember the pictures you used to get in packages of cigarettes, or that you saw in magazines in barber shops? Anna Held and Eva Tanguay with shapes like elegant parlor lamp chimneys? Where are they now? Now, on the street, what do you see? Creatures with the uncomplex awkwardness of calves or colts, with two little knobs for breasts and indicated buttocks that, except for their soft look, might well belong to a boy of fifteen. Not satisfying any more; just exciting and monotonous. And mostly monotonous. Where," he con-
tinued "are the soft bulging rabbit-like things women used to have inside their clothes? Gone, with the poor Indian and ten-cent beer and cambric drawers. But still, they are kind of nice, these young girls: kind of like a thin monotonous flute music or something."

The young steward, David, forms an attachment for Patricia which more closely resembles adoration than love. Faulkner charac-
terizes his yearning as dumb and doglike. David allows Patricia to persuade him to run away with her, and they set out on foot, like two children on a lark, into the mosquito-infested swamplands of coastal Louisiana. The journey is a nightmare which might have ended in tragedy if Mosquitoes had been that kind of book. David gives Patricia his shirt to ward off the swarms of vicious mosquitoes, and carries her on his back when she tires, remaining dumb and doglike to the end. When they have found their way back to the yacht, after Patricia has returned to her cabin—and her world—David's hopeless long-
ing for her is revealed in a way which is reminiscent of another of Faulkner's grieving brothers:

It was David, the steward. He sat on a coiled rope and he held something in his hands, between his knees. When Fairchild stopped beside him David raised his head slowly into the moonlight and gazed at the older man, making no effort to conceal that which he held. Fairchild leaned nearer to see. It was a slipper, a single slipper, cracked and stained with dried mud and disreputable, yet seeming still to hold in its mute shape something of that hard and sexless graveness of hers. After a while David looked away, gazing out again across the dark water and its path of shifting silver, holding the slipper between his hands; and without speaking Fairchild turned and went quickly away.

13 Ibid., p. 198.
14 Ibid., pp. 136–137.
15 Ibid., p. 194.
Two final physical characteristics common to members of the Sister Set are gray eyes (Patricia's are "opaque as smoke"\textsuperscript{16}), and hair of an indeterminate color which Faulkner says is "not yellow and not brown." As early as 1925, in one of the New Orleans Sketches entitled "The Kid Learns," there was a girl named Mary, a clear Sister figure:

Down the street she came, swinging her flat young body with all the awkward grace of youth, swinging her thin young arms; beneath her hat he saw hair neither brown nor gold, and gray eyes. Clean as a colt she swung past him . . . \textsuperscript{17}

The young tough named Johnny appoints himself Mary's protector after seeing her only once on the street, and gives his life to protect her from "the Wop," a Capone-like villain. When Johnny is shot the metamorphosis occurs which we are to see repeated with increasing subtleness throughout Faulkner's fiction—the transformation of Little Sister into Little Sister Death:

Why, say, here she was again beside him, with her young body all shining and her hair that wasn't brown and wasn't gold and her eyes the color of sleep; but she was somehow different at the same time.

"Mary?" said Johnny tentatively.

"Little Sister Death," corrected the shining one, taking his hand.\textsuperscript{18}

Carvel Collins, in his excellent introduction to the collected \textit{New Orleans Sketches}, calls attention to Faulkner's use of this figure from St. Francis of Assisi, and cites two other examples from unpublished materials:

This use of the addition which the dying St. Francis made to the 'Canticle of Creatures' was to reappear in Faulkner's work. In a general way it seems already to have been in his poem 'The Lilacs,' published in \textit{The Double Dealer} in June, 1925, but written much earlier. More significant use of it is in the later, unpublished work titled \textit{Mayday}: when Sir Galwyn of Arthgyl, rid of Hunger, the companion who has been on his right hand, and of Pain, the companion who has been on his left hand, approaches his end at the stream, he sees St. Francis and gladly joins the shining maiden who he learns is Little Sister Death.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 167.
\textsuperscript{19}Carvel Collins, Introduction to \textit{New Orleans Sketches}, p. 29.
Collins remarks on the echoes of this scene in Quentin Compson’s death, but pursues the idea no further. We will note the Little Sister Death relationship, in varying degrees of subtlety, in several more of Faulkner’s works.

Going back to Soldiers’ Pay, we find two young women who are clearly Sister figures, although one (Cecily Saunders) has more than a little of the Primal female in her nature. In this novel Faulkner seems not yet to have fully developed and separated out the female who is to be more bovine than epicene in later works. The women who play out roles similar to Cecily’s in later fiction are invariably Primal figures.

Margaret Powers has already given up her virginity when we meet her, and has slipped into the role of Little Sister Death. Her first husband was killed in France shortly after their marriage; she marries Donald Mahon to give him an easier death, and refuses to marry Sargeant Gilligan partly because of this death-cycle which seems to attend her. She tells Gilligan, ‘‘. . . I have been married twice already, with damn little luck either time, and I just haven’t the courage to risk it again . . . If I married you you’d be dead in a year, Joe. All the men that marry me die, you know.’ ’’

Margaret’s physical appearance differs drastically from that of other Set members, but there are also similarities.

She was dark. Had Gilligan and Lowe ever seen an Aubrey Beardsley, they would have known that Beardsley would have sickened for her: he had drawn her so often dressed in peacock hues, white and slim and depraved among meretricious trees and impossible marble fountains.

When Gilligan admonishes her about the unseemliness of her position in the Mahon household before she marries Donald, Margaret exhibits that indifference to reputation which is evident in all of Faulkner’s young women:

“They’ll think you are one of them French what-do-you-call-’ems the Loot brought back with him. Your good name won’t be worth nothing after these folks get through with it.”
“My good name is your trouble, not mine, Joe.”
“My trouble? How do you mean?”


Ibid., pp. 23–24.
"Men are the ones who worry about our good names, because they gave them to us. But we have other things to bother about, ourselves. What you mean by a good name is like a dress that's too flimsy to wear comfortably."\(^{22}\)

Joe Gilligan settles for a brother-role in Margaret's life, attending her with the inarticulate yearning which Sister figures inspire in all kinds of men. We see Margaret at a later stage of development than most of Faulkner's Sister figures, and she has attained a kind of bleak serenity, an emotional stasis similar to that attained by Temple Drake in *Requiem for a Nun*.

Cecily Saunders is another rich source of Sister-characteristics, being a virgin with the typically epicene and treelike body:

She was like a flower stalk or a young tree relaxed against the table: there was something so fragile, so impermanent ... yet strong withal as a poplar is strong through very absence of strength, about her ...\(^ {23}\)

... her slightly rough voice, like a tangle of golden wires ...\(^ {24}\)

The light passing through her fine hair gave her a halo and lent her frail dress a fainting nimbus about her crumpling body like a stricken poplar.\(^ {25}\)

... Cecily clothed delicately in a silver frock, fragile as spun glass ... The light falling diffidently on her, felt her arm, her short body, suavely indicated her long virginal legs.\(^ {26}\)

Her hand seemed to melt into his yet remain without volition, her hand unawaked in his and her body also sleeping, crushed softly about with her fragile clothing. Her long legs, not for locomotion, but for the studied completion of a rhythm carried to its *nth*: compulsion of progress, movement; her body created for all men to dream after. A poplar, vain and pliant, trying attitude after attitude, gesture after gesture ... Her unseen face imbursed with light and her body, which was no body, crumpling a dress that had been dreamed. Not for maternity, not even for love: a thing for the eye and the mind. Epicene, he thought, feeling her slim bones, the bitter nervousness latent in her flesh.\(^ {27}\)

As we noted in *Mosquitoes*, Faulkner does a good deal of "spelling things out" in the early fiction. In *Soldiers' Pay* he leads three charac-

\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 73.
\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 56.
\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 57.
\(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 66.
\(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 133.
\(^{27}\)Ibid., p. 156.
ters into a discussion of the Sister word “epicene.” Margaret Powers Mahon is discussing Cecily with the perennially lecherous Januarius Jones, in Gilligan’s presence.

“Mr. Jones says that to make love to Miss Saunders would be epicene.”
“Epicene? What’s that?”
“Shall I tell him, Mr. Jones, or will you?”
“Certainly. You intend to anyway, don’t you?”
“Epicene is something you want and can’t get, Joe.”

Cecily has a brother, but he is too young to be worried about her virginity. The guardian role is played by George Farr, who also becomes lover and then husband.

The three women, then—Patricia Robyn, Margaret Powers, and Cecily Saunders, are early examples of Faulkner’s Sister figure, and we can see her influence in his writing even before the first novel. She is to play a major role in The Sound and the Fury and Sanctuary, lesser though still important roles in Absalom, Absalom!, The Town, The Mansion, and in a number of short stories.

Caddy Compson is, in many ways, Faulkner’s most successful development of the Sister figure, and certainly the most subtle. She is a sympathetic character, although it would be hard to say exactly why we feel this way about her. Faulkner made no secret of his partiality to Caddy. “To me she was the beautiful one, she was my heart’s darling.”29 Her love and concern for Benjy certainly influence us in Caddy’s behalf, as well as the courage which Faulkner so admired. “Integrity” seems as good a word as any to describe the singular quality which draws us to Caddy, even as we recognize the essential waste and chaos involved in what Faulkner describes as her “doom.” Probably we are also influenced by the fact that Jason hates her, since Jason is as rotten a human being and as poor a judge of character as one is likely to find.

The Sound and the Fury contains no physical description of Caddy in the usual terms of height, build, hair color, and so forth. Her brothers’ reactions to her are emotional, subjective; the physical Caddy is simply taken for granted. The two brothers whom she loves make impossible demands on her, but are no more capable of giving

28Ibid., pp. 200–201.
her real love than are the other members of the family. Both Benjy and Quentin insist, in their separate ways, that Caddy remain virgin; they want to stop time, keeping her in the Sister role forever. When she had gone from them, Benjy settles for one of her slippers, and Quentin turns to her dark shadow, Little Sister Death.

Quentin's thoughts and reveries during his last day of life provide insight into the intense and often hazardous Sister-brother relationship:

Because women so delicate so mysterious Father said. Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced. Moons he said full and yellow as harvest moons her hips her thighs. Outside outside of them always out. Yellow. Feetsoles with walking like. Then know that some man that all those mysterious and imperious concealed. With all that inside of them shapes an outward suavity waiting for a touch to. Liquid putrefaction like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odour of honeysuckle all mixed up.\(^{30}\)

Although Quentin is not the only one of Faulkner's males to think of woman's menses as "filth," he is the only one whose obsession with his own sister's sexuality drives him to madness.

And Father said it's because you are a virgin: don't you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you and not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said You don't know. You can't know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realize that tragedy is secondhand.\(^{31}\)

In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it. Because it means less to women, Father said. He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it's like death: only a state in which the others are left and I said, But to believe it doesn't matter and he said, That's what's so sad about anything: not only virginity, and I said, Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin and he said, That's why that's sad too; nothing is even worth the changing of it, and Shreve said if he's got better sense than to chase after the dirty little sluts and I said Did you ever have a sister? Did you? Did you?\(^{32}\)

Like Father said down the long and lonely lightrays you might see Jesus


\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 135.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., pp. 97–98.
walking, like. And the good Saint Francis that said Little Sister Death, that never had a sister.  

Quentin tortures himself with thoughts of how he might have prevented or nullified Caddy’s giving herself to Dalton Ames. At one point he wishes that he might have been Dalton’s mother, so that he could have prevented Dalton’s conception: “If I could have been his mother lying with open body lifted laughing, holding his father with my hand refraining, seeing, watching him die before he lived.” Another equally grotesque idea is that he might have told his father that he, not Dalton Ames, was the father of Caddy’s unborn child. Then he and Caddy would have been united in a sin so terrible that no one could part them. It is interesting to note that Quentin never wishes he had actually committed incest with Caddy, only that he had said that he did.

Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister. Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was, not Dalton Ames . . . If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame.

Faulkner’s introduction of the little Italian girl into Quentin’s death-wandering is a masterful touch of irony—“a little dirty child with eyes like a toy bear’s and two patent-leather pigtails.” Quentin’s first words to her are, “Hello, sister,” and while this was an accepted form of address for girl-children in the South in Quentin’s day, it was uncommon enough that its use in this particular situation

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33 Ibid., p. 96.  
34 Ibid., p. 99.  
36 Ibid., pp. 98–99.  
37 Ibid., p. 135.  
38 Ibid., p. 144.
is significant. The irony is that while Quentin lost his own sister to a seducer, an irate older brother is to accuse him of molesting this young girl who follows him against his will. At the moment of Quentin's tragedy, we are made to see the essential absurdity of the role which he has chosen to play through to its finish.

Temple Drake (Sanctuary) is another of Faulkner's fully developed Sister figures, a natural descendent of Cecily Saunders, with none of the courage or integrity which made Caddy admirable. Like Cecily, Temple is redheaded, with the same thin arms and long "blond"

legs, the same coltish awkwardness. Faulkner speaks of "... her high delicate head and her bold painted mouth and soft chin, her eyes blankly right and left looking, cool, predatory and discreet." Temple's father and four natural brothers protect her as best they can from improper and immoral influences; when she is beyond their help Gowan Stevens takes over; and when he gets too drunk to remember chivalry, the simple-minded Tommy attempts to shelter her.

Temple looked at him. They looked at one another soberly, like two children or two dogs. "What's your name?"

"My name's Tawmmy," he said. "Hit ain't no need to fret."

We are reminded briefly of Benjy as Tommy takes special notice of Temple's "slippers."

She stopped and stood on alternate legs, holding to Gowan, and removed her slippers. The man watched her, looking at the slippers.

"Durn if I could git ere two of my fingers into one of them things," he said. "Kin I look at em?" She gave him one. He turned it slowly in his hand. "Durn my hide," he said. He looked at Temple again with his pale, empty gaze. His hair grew innocent and straw-like bleached on the crown, darkening about his ears and neck in untidy curls. "She's a right tall gal, too," he said. "With them skinny legs of hers. How much she weigh?" Temple extended her hand. He returned the slipper slowly, looking at her...

It is in Tommy's efforts to shield Temple from the advances of the

40Ibid., p. 32.
41Ibid., p. 48.
42Ibid., p. 47.
other men that she becomes, for him, Little Sister Death. Popeye kills him to get to Temple. After Temple’s corruption is complete she leads another man—Alabama Red—to death at Popeye’s hands. Despite everything that happens to Temple, and her obvious willingness to let it happen, her father and brothers close ranks about her when she returns from Memphis, protecting the Sister long after there is anything worth protecting. Temple enters the courtroom to give false testimony which brings still another man—Lee Goodwin—to his death. When she has testified, her father escorts her from the witness stand:

Half way down the aisle the girl stopped again, slender in her smart open coat, her blank face rigid, then she moved on, her hand in the old man’s. They returned down the aisle, the old man erect beside her, looking to neither side . . . Again the girl stopped. She began to cringe back, her body arching slowly, her arm taughtening in the old man’s grasp. He bent toward her, speaking; she moved again, in that shrinking and rapt abasement. Four younger men were standing stiffly erect near the exit. They stood like soldiers, staring straight ahead until the old man and the girl reached them. Then they moved and surrounded the other two, and in a close body, the girl hidden among them, they moved toward the door. Here they stopped again; the girl could be seen shrunk against the wall just inside the door, her body arched again. She appeared to be clinging there, then the five bodies hid her again and again in a close body the group passed through the door and disappeared.43

Eight years later Temple Drake Stevens is to admit what readers of Sanctuary suspected all along—that she could have escaped from Popeye if she had wanted to; that she had been actively seeking evil when it fell into her life by accident. Requiem for a Nun does not give us any fuller understanding of Temple; she is merely permitted to purge herself of some of the old guilt, and to return to the conventional world which she had once flouted.

In the novel Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner created a classic Sister in Judith Sutpen. The novel revolves around her possible marriage, and the subsequent death at her brother’s hand of the man she was to marry.

Henry, Judith’s brother, not only selects the man with whom Judith is to fall in love, but also participates actively in the romance, he himself loving Charles Bon with what Faulkner calls “. . . that

43 Ibid., pp. 347–348.
complete and abnegant devotion which only a youth, never a woman, gives to another youth or man. . . ." It may be that the relationship between Henry and Bon is the ultimate and inevitable result of obsessive concern for the Sister-virgin.

Yes, he loved Bon, who seduced him as surely as he seduced Judith—the country boy born and bred . . . Henry was the provincial, the clown almost, given to instinctive and violent action rather than to thinking who may have been conscious that his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity was a false quantity which must incorporate itself in an inability to endure in order to be precious, to exist, and so must depend upon its loss, absence, to have existed at all. In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. Perhaps that is what went on, not in Henry's mind, but in his soul.45

Of course it is necessary to remember that this passage is a part of Mr. Compson's account of the Sutpen debacle, and that, in keeping with the texture of the entire book, he is interpreting past events as he imagines them to have been. For our purposes, however, the material is valuable even if it represents no more than a male attitude which might possibly have existed in truth between the young men in question. In other words, the very fact that Mr. Compson can seriously pose the theory means that Faulkner regarded such relationships as an accepted part of the culture. Compson further speculates that Charles Bon was an active participant in the three-way romance.

It was because Bon not only loved Judith after his fashion but he loved Henry too and I believe in a deeper sense than merely after his fashion. Perhaps in his fatalism he loved Henry the better of the two, seeing perhaps in the sister merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth—.46

Faulkner uses this man's concept of this relationship to make quite clear something which the careful reader of his fiction has suspected on many occasions—that the individual Sister-female is of no impor-

44Ibid., p. 107.
46Ibid., pp. 107–108.
tance whatever; that she exists only as a kind of unavoidable X-factor in an equation whose principals are men; and that the ideal love relationship would be one in which the male never touches the female—in which he despoils, instead, the mind and the “soul” of her brother.

... as I said before, it was not Judith who was the object of Bon’s love or of Henry’s solicitude. She was just the blank shape, the empty vessel in which each of them strove to preserve, not the illusion of himself nor his illusion of the other but what each conceived the other to believe him to be—the man and the youth, seducer and seduced, who had known one another, seduced and been seduced, victimized in turn each by the other, conqueror vanquished by his own strength, vanquished conquering by his own weakness, before Judith came into their joint lives even by so much as girlname.47

The circle of incest is made complete by the eventual revelation that Charles Bon, beloved of Henry Sutpen, Judith’s fiancée, is also their Negro half-brother. Henry kills Bon, Bon allows himself to be killed, and the permanence of Judith’s virginity is thus assured.

Another of Faulkner’s original and intriguing female characters, Linda Snopes (Kohl), is a persistent Sister figure for Gavin Stevens—as a child and young lady in The Town, and as a woman in The Mansion. Being the daughter of Faulkner’s most magnificent Primal figure, Linda lives somewhat in her mother’s shadow, and is more often described in terms of what she is not than of what she is. She is not another Eula. As V. K. Ratliff comments, “... being Helen of Troy’s daughter was kind of like being say the ex-Pope of Rome or the ex-Emperor of Japan: there wasn’t much future to it.”48

Linda becomes Little Sister Death for her husband, a Jewish sculptor who is killed while fighting beside her in the Spanish Civil War. Upon her return to Jefferson as a widow, Charles Mallison says of her: “She was tall for a woman, so tall she didn’t have much shape ... but then I don’t know: women like that and once you get their clothes off they surprise you. ...”49 Linda becomes the agent of death for her own stepfather before leaving Jefferson forever. In Gavin Stevens’ relationships with Linda and her mother can be seen Faulkner’s clearest and most complete enunciation of the male-

47 Ibid., pp. 119–120.
49 Ibid., pp. 194 and 198.
female dichotomy, but such a study is beyond the scope of this paper. Turning finally to Faulkner’s short stories, we find several members of the Sister Set, and though their characters are obviously less fully drawn than those in the novels, some similarities are clear. Susan Reed, of “Hair,” Louise King, of “Dr. Martino,” and Elly, whose name is also the title of her story, belong in this group.

Susan Reed is a child when her story begins; “(she was a thin little girl then, with big scared eyes and this straight, soft hair not blonde and not brunette).”50 Susan grows up “too fast.”

She would come to the shop for a haircut, all painted up, in some kind of little flimsy off-color clothes that showed her off, with her face watchful and bold and discreet all at once, and her hair gummed and twisted about her face. But even the stuff she put on it couldn’t change that brown-yellow color. Her hair hadn’t changed at all.51

Hawkshaw, the barber, looks after her through her childhood, believes only the best of her even after she has become notoriously wayward. “It’s not that she was bad. There’s not any such thing as a woman born bad, because they are all born bad, born with the badness in them. The thing is, to get them married before the badness comes to a natural head.”52 Hawkshaw marries Susan. Thirteen years earlier he had been engaged to marry a girl who resembled her: “They told me she was one of those thin, unhealthy girls . . . with a lot of straight hair not brown and not yellow.”53

Hubert Jarrod, the young man who is to marry Louise King, is attracted to and puzzled by her from their first meeting:

He thought about her quite a lot on the return train—a thin, tense, dark girl. “That to come out of Mississippi,” he thought. “Because she’s got it: a kid born and bred in a Mississippi swamp.” He did not mean sex appeal. He could not have been fooled by that alone, who had been three years now at New Haven, belonging to the right clubs and all and with money to spend. And besides, Louise was a little on the epicene. What he meant was a quality of which he was not yet consciously aware: a beyond-looking, a passionate sense for and belief in immanent change to which the rhinoceros-like sufficiency of his Yale and oil-well veneer was a little impervious at first.54

51 Ibid., p. 135.
52 Ibid., p. 133.
53 Ibid., p. 139.
54 Ibid., p. 565.
Louise is literally Little Sister Death for the ill and aging Dr. Martino. In some mysterious way which Faulkner never defines, the doctor has become dependent upon Louise for his very existence; he dies quietly on the afternoon when she runs away with Hubert.

There is no detailed physical description of Ailanthia (Elly), but we are reminded of Temple Drake by the perverse intensity of her nature. She defies her grandmother by associating with a young man who is presumed to be part Negro, and brings about his death (as well as her grandmother's) when he refuses to marry her. Like Temple, she reacts with shallow pettiness even in her moment of tragedy. " 'Something happened,' she whimpered. 'He hit me. And now they are dead; it's me that's hurt, and nobody will come.' She moaned a little, whimpering."55

One final member of the Sister Set is Faulkner's marvelously comic "maiden-lady," Miss Sophonsiba Beauchamp, in the short story "Was." The story itself is a lighthearted study of the mores and taboos surrounding the Sister-virgin in Faulkner's South. We see Miss Sophonsiba through the eyes of a young boy:

Then they stood in the hall, until presently there was a jangling and swishing noise and they began to smell the perfume, and Miss Sophonsiba came down the stairs. Her hair was roached under a lace cap; she had on her Sunday dress and beads and a red ribbon around her throat and a little nigger girl carrying her fan and he stood quietly a step behind Uncle Buck, watching her lips until they opened and he could see the roan tooth. He had never known anyone before with a roan tooth and he remembered how one time his grandmother and his father were talking about Uncle Buddy and Uncle Buck and his grandmother said that Miss Sophonsiba had matured into a fine-looking woman once. Maybe she had. He didn't know. He wasn't but nine.56

When Uncle Buck ventures into Miss Sophonsiba's room and bed one night by mistake, her brother Hubert declares that they must be married.

This decision is reaffirmed when Hubert beats Uncle Buck in a poker game in which the stakes are $500 against Sophonsiba—low hand to get Sophonsiba.

55Ibid., p. 223.
When Uncle Buddy arrives, he induces Hubert to play another hand and wins his brother's freedom from the betrothal.  

Uncle Buck has won a battle, but Miss Sophonsiba wins the war. We learn in “The Bear” that the two were eventually married.

Only with Miss Sophonsiba does Faulkner assay a light and irreverent approach to the Sister figure. She is primarily a creature of doom, however fragile and shallow she may appear; a curiously haunting Beardsley-Held composite, miscast for tragedy. She might be said to epitomize unliberated woman, and while Faulkner’s representation of her approaches perfection, he most certainly did not invent her. Rather, he held his incomparable mirror to the society which produced her, a society which verbalized its most virulent fear in the simplistic phrase, “Would you want your sister to marry one—?”

Finally, the paradox inherent in Faulkner’s use of the figure from St. Francis is worth noting here. Recognizing his own approaching death, the good saint reached out to embrace this experience, welcoming death with abiding faith, as a beloved sister. Conversely, Faulkner began with the pleasant and familiar figure of the little sister, transforming her, by means of a dark and perverted love, into a symbol of pain and death. St. Francis saw in death a Little Sister. Faulkner saw in the little sister—Death.