

Victim Emily: A Rose for Emily from the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract: A Rose for Emily, written by William Faulkner, has recently received various interpretations, but few scholars focus on new historicism analysis, exploring the integration of literature and history. This paper will try to back up the heroine's victim identity with new historicism analysis, interpreting the relationship between Miss Emily and the old class division and the patriarchal society. In this way the paper provides a clear picture of American history in the post-Civil War period and the historical value of this novel.

Keywords: New historicism; Miss Emily; Class structure; Patriarchal society

1 Introduction

William Faulkner, one of the most influential American novelists, was born in an old southern family and created a series of typical southern characters in his Yoknapatawpha saga. A Rose for Emily was a short story happened in Jefferson, showing Miss Emily's conflicts with the "new" South, who was a relic of southern aristocratic. Since the short story published, scholars have made various interpretations on its narrative features, symbolism, female characters, etc.^[1] Most articles analyzed the cause of this tragedy, but few scholars make a clear link between Emily herself and the history at that time.

New historicism emphasizes the interaction between literature and reality. All historical records are polished with special languages and the author's analysis, and literature works in reverse make great influence on the history development. Therefore, readers could not only know the history better based on the textual analysis, but also think further which even influence the social development.

Miss Emily was an image reflecting the history of the old South and the status quo of southern aristocrats. In other words, she on the one hand was a victim of the old class division and the patriarchal society; on the other hand, Faulkner used Emily to evoke social attention towards the southern conditions, especially southern females.

2 Miss Emily and the Class Division

Miss Emily was a traditional southern lady grown up in a white, rich, and privileged family. At the beginning of the story, Faulkner introduced Emily as a "fallen monument", who was "a tradition, a duty, and a care"^[2]. In other words, Miss Emily was created as a symbol of the old South, which gave readers chances to know more about the traditional upper class.

In this fictional southern town, Emily lived in an old-fashioned and most conspicuous house, which even attracted townspeople to look around when she died, showing her noble status in the old South. For townspeople, this noble building is psychologically distant and mysterious in daily life, which indicated the great differences between noble class and the bottom before the Civil War. Meanwhile, Emily's behavior and experience also showed the power of upper class at that time. As an old lady, Emily always carried her head high enough and ignored the new laws at her will. She refused to pay taxes or explain her purpose of buying drugs only because her noble status. Obviously, landed gentry in the old South had supreme power to master the society, and common people can never ask anything about them. This strict class division in particular reflected in Emily's love story. Miss Emily was an old maid living with only one servant. Under this circumstance, people should have blessed her when she fell in love with a young man, but they de facto called her as "poor Emily" because the man was a northern worker, who cannot marry with southern noble ladies as tradition suggested.

From these descriptions, readers could know more about the real states of the old Southern after the Civil War. Faulkner showed a clear picture of the old class divisions and Emily was one of the victims under the strict rules. Emily's adjustment failure and sufferings because of the great social changes retold southern life in the reconstruction stage. Owing to the Civil War, Lincoln's administration broke up the gap between classes; however, without well-prepared settlements, the post-war South was in a mess, leading to numerous psychological problems and serious dislocation between the spiritual and real world in the southerner's hearts. Hence, the author created Miss Emily, a victim of this tradition-newness conflict, to remind Americans to take care of the southern conditions.

3 Miss Emily and the Patriarchal Society

Miss Emily was a traditional southern lady living under the great "protection" from men around. Faulkner described two men that

influenced and even controlled the heroine's life, which was a true portrayal of the cruel patriarchal society.

In her childhood, it was her father that dominated her life, especially marriage in the novel. For townspeople, what impressed them was that Emily's father always stood before her with a horsewhip, trying to drive away all the admirers, because "none of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such"^[3]. This behavior undoubtedly blocked Emily's communication with others and gradually changed her into an image of a noble lady from a woman alive, which was a beginning of her miserable life. What directly led to her tragedy was love experience. Although it was an underappreciated love because of Homer's low status, Miss Emily was the blaming target, which indicated in the male-dominated society, men were protectors and providers while women were the keepers of morality^[4]. In addition, Homer was dominant in this sexual relation, who decided the end of love. Miss Emily was a representative of women in the patriarchal society who were men's accessories without self-will and self-decision-making rights.

Under this patriarchal circumstance, Miss Emily's extreme resistance reminded readers to pay attention on women rights. She was brave enough to break the rules and fell in love with a northerner; however, due to the unchangeable traditional beliefs, this rebellion was doomed to failure, which resulted in the later cruel and mad behavior. Scholars have different opinions on this madness, but given to the patriarchal conditions, Miss Emily could do nothing but fight in the crazy way to express her anger and helplessness with the society. As Diane Roberts commented, Miss Emily shook not only the integrity of the spinster, but also the entire foundation of Southern history and class.

The author added rebellious color to this victim of patriarchal system, which may be a response to the popular female movements in the early twentieth, focusing on the conflict between female consciousness and patriarchal culture in the long history.

4 Miss Emily and William Faulkner

William Faulkner was a typical southern aristocrat who had witnessed the decline of the old South. His deep love and nostalgia resulted in a series of works that showed the southern life in the reconstruction stage, among which *A Rose for Emily* was one of the most famous short story to represent the struggle of southerners after the Civil War. Through this fictional text, readers could know more about the psychological problems existing in the South. It was the collision between traditional rules and new rising ideas that led to the great psychological gap. People had already been used to living according to the old rules, that is, noble families has supreme power to dominate the life of common people while townspeople can never step in the aristocrats' behaviors; However, it seems that something should be changed because of the Civil War, which advocated the equal rights. Nevertheless, the administration did not take concrete measures, leading to the conflict in the story: Emily and townspeople still believed her as a noble lady by default, and they asked Emily to behave nobly while the war gave the equal status for both Emily and townspeople. It was a true portrayal of southern conditions.

In addition, Faulkner described this story with his own words, endowing history with personal feelings and great wishes. On the one hand, he expressed his deep love for this land through Miss Emily. For Emily, the author set a miserable ending, but he still offered a rose to this poor victim, which was once explained by himself, "here was a woman who had had a tragedy, and irrevocable tragedy and nothing could be done about it, and I pitied her and this was a salute. . .to a woman you would hand a rose"^[5]. Faulkner never blamed anyone in this town and they all are victims of this environment after war, which showed his love for this land. On the other hand, he was clear about the southern problems and evils in the past. Therefore, he revealed the cruel traditions and rules through Emily's tragedy. Miss Emily was a victim during the great changes, and also a symbol of the decline of the old South and the birth of a new civilization. He mercilessly showed the conditions after the war, reminding readers to pay more attention on the southern problems. What's more, the author designed the unusual rebellion for Emily, which is an appeal to the female movement in the 1930s.

5 Conclusion

Miss Emily was a victim of class divisions. She had been regarded as noble class since she was born, and she strictly followed the noble traditions and rules throughout her life. However, the Civil War broke the traditions overnight without any suitable measures for southerners, resulting in the great gap in this aristocrat's mind. The story led readers to know more about the real southern conditions in this reconstruction period, which showed the sufferings and struggles of the old nobles under the new circumstances.

In addition, Miss Emily was also a victim of patriarchal society. Both the father's "protection" and Homer's abandon were results of the patriarchal system, and it was also these men that directly caused Emily's tragedy, revealing the cruelty and inequality of patriarchal society.

This short story showed the real southern conditions after the Civil War, from which readers could dig out the psychological state of southerners in the great changes. At the same time, William Faulkner made use of Emily to express his love for the land and the reflection on the old traditions, appealing people to focus on the post-war South as well as the feminism movement. The story undoubtedly played a great role in historicity of text and textuality of history. It was a creation that integrated the history and literature, showing readers the real history as well as the author's emotions and time significance.

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