

The Rose Blooming in Tragedy: An Analysis of the Symbols of Objects in *A Rose for Emily*

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Abstract

A Rose for Emily “is one of the most representative short stories” by American writer William Faulkner. The novel takes the southern town after the American Civil War as the background, and revolves around the life of Emily, the declining aristocrat in the south. This article explores and discusses the rose blooming in tragedy from symbols of objects: The symbolic meaning of the rose, The symbolic meaning of the hair, The symbolic meaning of the house and The symbolic meaning of Emily’s tragic character.

Key words: *A Rose for Emily*; Symbolism; Rose; Hair; House; Emily’s tragic character

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1. INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner (1897-1962) was one of the greatest American writers in the 20th century, the main representative of stream of consciousness literature in the United States. Because making a strong and artistic unparalleled contribution to contemporary American novels, he was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. William Faulkner was a leading figure in Southern literature, and almost all his novels are set in the South, and most of the stories take place in Yoknapatawpha County, known as Yoknapatawpha

genealogy. His novels were built around Yoknapatawpha County figures and events reflecting the prosperity and decline of American Southern society in more than a century before and after the Civil War, and discuss the moral and belief deficiencies and affluence of American Southern people.

A Rose for Emily is Faulkner’s most outstanding short story, expressing his lament for the glory of the Southern aristocracy in the past. In the novel, the author employs a large number of symbolic techniques to showcase the influence of northern industrial civilization on southern traditional morality, analyze people’s pathological psychology, and describe the tragic life of Miss Emily Gleason. When Emily was young, she wore white clothes and was very slim, like a pure rose, but many suitors were stopped by her whipped father. Being single for a long time has made Emily’s personality strange and introverted. After her father passed away, Emily met Homer, a road builder from the north, but he had no intention of marrying her. Then, in despair, Emily poisoned her lover with arsenic and tortured her with her body for forty years. (Zheng, 2021)

2. SYMBOLISM

Symbolism, a noun derived from Greek “Symbolon”, it originally referred to “a wooden board (or a kind of pottery) divided into two halves, each guest hold one piece, and when they meet again, putting two halves into a piece. It was the token of love”. After several changes, its meaning has become “with a form as a concept of the customer representative”, any signs or objects that can express a certain idea or thing is called “symbol”. In the mid-19th century, symbolism became a literary school and trend of thought in France, and gradually spread to other countries of Europe and North America. In 1886, the Symbolist poet Jean Moréas published two manifestos, that helped establish the name Symbolism

for the movement that was growing out of and replacing Decadence. And in the field of literature, symbolism means “the writing technique of using a symbol is something that conveys two kinds of meaning; it is simply itself, and it stands for something other than itself. In other words, a symbol is both literal and figurative”. Besides, American poet and literary critic Arthur Simmon’s symbol is defined as “forms of thoughts, all the conventional tangible to intangible performance”.

2.1 Symbols of Objects in *A Rose For Emily*

2.1.1 The Symbolic Meaning of the Rose

The rose is a symbol of various beauty in the world, and what Emily lacked in her life was precisely the word “beauty”. Since childhood, Emily has been an accessory of her father. After her father’s death, she has become a sacrificial item in the whole town. The only hope that brings Emily new life is the Homer’s love, which is like a child’s play. Finally, Emily, who has been lonely for thirty years, chooses to stay at home and imprison the rest of her life in the old house left by her father. Based on the conflicting relationship between Emily and the main characters in the novel, the rose symbolizes a beauty that Emily has never had in her life.

Missing natural affection.

Firstly, roses represent warm family relationships, especially the relationship between father and daughter. In a family with a lack of maternal love, fatherly kindness and filial piety should be the most harmonious scene. The daughter should have grown up healthy and happy under the careful care of her father, but what Emily experienced was that her father was strict, her daughter was humble, and her father ordered her daughter to obey. Her desires and nature as a human being were all crushed, ultimately leading to a withdrawn and eccentric temperament.

Missing love.

Secondly, the rose symbolizes beautiful love. Emily disregards worldly expectations and breaks through all obstacles to date Homer. In love, Emily is brave and determined, lively and happy. With Homer, she is no longer Miss “Emily Grierson” or “poor Emily”, just Emily. She happily ordered men’s toiletries and full sets of men’s clothing, meticulously decorated her new house, and longed for a beautiful marriage life. And Homer’s insistence on leaving was like taking Emily’s life and destroying her last glimmer of fantasy about happiness.

Missing harmonious social relationships.

Finally, the rose symbolizes harmonious and orderly social relationships. Emily, influenced by her domineering father, has a submissive and arrogant personality, and has become extreme or even abnormal due to her lover’s departure. Imagine if the town residents could care about Emily with a tolerant and respectful attitude throughout the entire process, would things have a different turning point? Treating Emily as an ordinary person, respecting

her as an ordinary woman, accompanying her when losing her father, blessing her when in love, and comforting her when in a breakup is the true acceptance of Emily. And Emily was ruthlessly deprived of this social identity, and in the eyes of the townspeople, she was just a monument without a soul and emotions.

2.1.2 The Symbolic Meaning of the Hair

The helplessness of angels fighting

The biggest structural feature of this novel is the flashback in time. At the beginning of the novel, the people in the town are reminiscing about “Emily, who is slender and dressed in white, standing behind her back, her father’s profile with her feet crossed in front, holding a whip in hand, and a front door that opens backwards that happens to embed their figures”. In the inherent concept of the South, “all Southern women represent the ideals of Southern men and a status quo worth striving to maintain. Emily is a Southern belle brought up by her father’s traditional lady model, and “long hair” has always been regarded as a typical feature of Southern belle’s charm and tenderness. In the early 19th century, the southern United States was based on a plantation economy, and the position of the father as a plantation owner in the family was self-evident. It can be imagined that the father who wielded a whip imparted strict patriarchal ideology and Puritan values to his daughter. He would rather let his daughter remain unmarried for life than uphold the honor of his family. A whip not only drove away many suitors, but also made Emily a vassal of patriarchal society. But after her father’s death, “when I saw her again, her hair had been cut short and she looked like a girl, similar to the angel statue on the church window - with a hint of sadness and solemnity. Hair is an important component of the body, and changing the shape of hair is one of the ways the body socializes, which means reacting and making decisions to a certain power system. If Emily, who had long hair before, was submissive and submissive to her tyrannical father, then Emily’s short hair image after her father’s death suggests that she is striving to break away from the shadow of patriarchy and “start from scratch” to rediscover her own love and happiness.

The failure of the integration of the South and the North.

In the novel, Faulkner sees hair as the most intuitive manifestation of the human soul. In the text, Miss Emily’s mood is constantly reflected in her hair, becoming one of the externalized manifestations of her soul. Sure enough, when we saw Emily again, “she gained weight and her hair turned gray. In the following years, her hair became grayer and grayer, becoming a pepper like iron gray, and the color no longer changed. Until the day of her death at the age of seventy-four, she still maintained her vibrant iron gray color, like the hair of an active man”. From her hair alone, Miss Emily is already a completely tough man. With the passage of time and the vicissitudes of life, the

feminine appearance of the originally beautiful and weak noble ladies has become blurred, which is a great irony to Emily, the representative of Southern belle.

What is even more heartbreaking is Emily's love affair with Homer. Emily was attracted by Homer and gave up the image of a Southern belle for him. In fact, it is the backward southern tradition that is vulnerable to the emerging northern civilization. However, on the one hand, in the eyes of the noble and traditional southerners, their status and identity differed greatly, and their combination would inevitably have an impact on the Hierarchy of the southern society at that time, threatening the original social order. On the other hand, under the yoke of Puritan women's morality, women's normal physiological needs were cruelly suppressed. If Miss Emily cannot control herself, it will undermine the foundation of the entire Puritan women's philosophy. Naturally, their love was questioned by the world, but the arrogant Emily still went her own way without any scruples. Although Miss Emily is fully prepared to get married, for Homer, who has no intention of starting a family, marriage is just a wall and he will not immerse himself in it. The betrayal of her beloved is undoubtedly a more painful blow for Emily, who adheres to southern traditions, than the passing of her father. Love is deep, hate is intense, and in the end, when only sadness, anger, and hatred remain in a beautiful love, only extreme means can be used to resolve it. Faulkner vividly portrays the conflict between the old Southern order and the new Northern civilization (Ouyang, 2012), as well as the tragic struggle and last resort of the Southern nobles represented by Miss Emily, through his description of the changes in Miss Emily's appearance.

The estrangement between white and black people.

The issue of race has always been an unavoidable theme in Faulkner's novels. Another image of hair in the novel is related to the black slave Toby. "We watched as the black man's hair turned white and his back hunched, and he still carried a shopping basket in and out." The author's choice of black Toby here has another intention.

The silent Toby image designed by Faulkner reflects its ambiguity in racial issues. Although slavery was abolished after the civil war, racial discrimination remained severe. In the novel, the "we" in the town see black slaves acting eerily like ghosts. The most important group, black slaves, were deprived of their right to speak. Michel Foucault's "discourse" view holds that power is achieved through discourse. Toby, as Emily's servant, appeared six times in the novel, but never said a word throughout. Secretly, he repeats the same thing meaningless every day, and in the end, "he walks from the right outside the house to the back, and then never appears again." Although the black slaves regained their freedom after Miss Emily's death, it was clearly difficult for them to integrate into the society at that time, and they had to choose to escape in order to escape the racial discrimination of the white class.

The behavior of black slave Toby reflects the social and psychological barriers that still exist between the black community and the white class after the American Civil War.

2.1.3 The Symbolic Meaning of the House

The values and traditions of the old South

The increasingly dilapidated and decadent homesteads symbolize the headquarters of all the evil social orders and declining moral norms that suppress human nature in the South, such as patriarchy and social hierarchy. The description of Emily's house runs throughout the novel. It is a cage under patriarchy - 'he drove away all suitors'; The protagonist's flower like youth is brutally imprisoned by her authoritarian and tyrannical father, who pursues Puritan family ethics and patriarchy and deprives young Emily of the right to love. In addition to her father, the stubborn adherence of the townspeople to social status also forced Emily into this cage - in order to maintain old traditional beliefs, they criticized and interfered with Emily, who was already an old maid; Believing that Emily's romantic relationship with Homer Barron was an insult to her aristocratic lineage and a disgrace to the entire town; They invited the pastor, wrote letters to her relatives, and ultimately forced Emily to hide in a dilapidated house. She began to isolate herself from the world, twisted her body and mind, and ultimately committed the demonic act of murdering Homer Barron. Therefore, the "dust filled" atmosphere in the house creates a oppressive, dull, gloomy, and creepy atmosphere, which is precisely a reflection of people's true feelings under the erosion and suppression of old southern morality. Here, Emily has become a victim, a victim of traditional culture, society, and national psychology.

Imprisonment, isolation and alienation.

The house was the only heritage the father left to Emily, which symbolizes imprisonment, isolation, and alienation. This big and squarish frame house set on what had once been their most select street, but now it had become an eyesore among eyesores. When her father was alive, the house was where Emily accompanies her father. Emily was imprisoned in it by the autocratic patriarchy. After meeting Homer, Emily walked out of the house and gained happiness and freedom. This house should have been their warm home after marriage, but eventually became her and Homer's grave. For the last forty years, Emily lived in the house like a dead woman, isolated from the world. (Zheng, 2021)

2.1.4 The Symbolic Meaning of Emily's Tragic Character

The decline of the southern aristocratic class.

The town residents in the novel are immersed in reminiscing about their glorious past, and they urgently need a traditional "idol" to provide them with spiritual support and comfort. Therefore, Miss Emily, the

descendant of the town nobles, becomes their eternal “monument”. The war has ended, and the sound of machines rumbling in the north is impacting the lives of Americans, and people are beginning to move towards the industrial age. The traditional aristocratic force in the southern society is just like the old house where Miss Emily lives. It is dilapidated but still standing. Although it is declining day by day, they have a deep-seated sense of racial self-Superiority complex in their blood and look at groups weaker than their class force with arrogant eyes. Miss Emily’s stubborn behavior was a representative of traditional southern society at that time. She refused to pay taxes, did not recognize the flow of time, refused to give up her father’s remains, and killed him in order to forever obtain her beloved, and slept together for over forty years.

The main purpose of the author is to make readers understand that Emily is a representative of the traditional Southern decline after the war. Her pathological state is an amplification of the pathological state of the entire southern society. So this novel is of great contemporary significance, using Gothic techniques to depict Emily’s fate and the general psychology of the entire southern society - her stubbornness and unwillingness to old traditions.

Emily is a finished product under the traditional values of the South, reflecting the outdated, ignorant, and backward traditional forces. She has always adhered to the traditional values of the South. Emily’s personality was distorted to a state of no pursuit under the oppression of patriarchy and traditional values, confusing life with death. This peculiar behavior led to the inevitability of her demise.

The collapse of virtue in ladies.

In *A Rose for Emily*, Miss Emily has always been a traditional representative and the embodiment of the old era. Born in the desirable Grierson family, she is a “Southern belle” from a famous family and has become an idol in the hearts of the town residents, People admire such a Southern belle who has grown up in the traditional folk culture environment and has worked hard to abide by the rules and regulations and faithfully practice the traditional values of folk culture all her life. In Faulkner’s works, although Emily is revered as “Miss”, in fact, Emily does not have any obvious female characteristics. As described in the book: “She has lived through generations like that - noble, peaceful, unable to escape, unable to approach, eccentric and exaggerated.” Emily’s female characteristics gradually blur over time, and her personality is constantly impacted by the tempering of her soul and society.

Emily’s girlhood, which was supposed to be innocent, romantic and infinitely beautiful, became monotonous and boring because of her submission to her father’s feudal ideology and autocratic rule. She is like a lonely rose, filled with longing and longing for love in her heart. However, in the process of long-term oppression and struggle, she becomes increasingly withered. She tried to pursue love, but was met with secular coldness and abandonment from her lover. The women forced the Baptist priests to visit Emily in an attempt to dissuade her from socializing with Bologna, but Emily refused to listen. Emily tried to get rid of the shackles and oppression of the class, get rid of her so-called “Southern belle” image, and bravely pursue her own happiness. Emily’s struggle was stubborn and silent. She resolutely decided to kill Homer and lay with her lover’s body until her own life ended. With her lifelong loneliness and emptiness, she guarded the illusory “Rose New House” in her heart, which was her beautiful fantasy of love. Emily’s inappropriate behavior caused criticism and ridicule from the conservative group who adhered to old moral concepts at the time. They all discussed that under the cover of extreme sadness, ladies from noble families should also maintain nobility and elegance. The disappearance of Emily was accompanied by the gradual disappearance of her image as a lady, as well as the gradual disappearance of traditional values in the South.

3. CONCLUSION

By using symbolism, William Faulkner successfully portrayed the fallen aristocrat Emily and portrayed her tragic life. Even though Emily’s psyche is twisted, she is still a murderer. But readers sympathize with her more than hate her, and everyone wants to give her a rose. Faulkner expressed his complex emotions towards the South by portraying the tragic image of Emily. On the one hand, he recognized the ugliness of Southern slavery and the necessity of the rise of Northern industrial civilization; On the other hand, he inevitably missed out on the glory of the southern past. In addition, he also sympathizes with those innocent people who suffer the transition between old and new civilizations. (Zheng, 2021)

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