

Respect or Superiority: The Townspeople's Feeling for Emily

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ABSTRACT

The oft-quoted story "A Rose for Emily", written by William Faulkner, tells a story of the mysterious protagonist, Emily Grierson, and her eccentric relationship with the townspeople of Jefferson in the South. This eccentric relationship is reflected in the four confrontations of this story. From these confrontations, the author of this essay concludes that the townspeople of Jefferson regard Emily as the incarnation of the Old South and have a mixed feeling of respect and superiority with Emily. This self-contradictory feeling for Emily is the reflection of their attitudes towards the Old South.

Keywords: *A Rose for Emily, Four Confrontations, Incarnation of the Old South, Respect and Superiority*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of "A Rose for Emily" in the year of 1930, it has been variously interpreted from different perspectives. Ruth Sullivan analysed its narration, holding that the narrator in this story is a voyeur [1]. Some critics explored the source of Emily. For instance, Hays argued that there are a great variety of similarities between Emily Dickinson and Emily Grierson, while Stronks believed that the source of Emily is based on the protagonist of "To Helen" written by Allan Poe [2-3]. Other critics' analysis focused on Emily's eccentricity with different theories of feminist, psychoanalysis, and structuralist, etc. [4-6].

Published criticism of the relationship between Emily and townspeople shares two universal assumptions: that Emily represents the Old South and resists the inevitability of time, change and death, while the townspeople symbolize the new order of the Post-Civil War era, so Emily is incompatible with the townspeople of Jefferson; and that Emily is the combination of an idol and a scapegoat, so the townspeople have the mixed feeling of both admiration and superiority with her. As for the latter assumption, Warren holds that the origin of this ambivalence is that Emily comprehends the world with her own terms [7]. The author of this essay partly agrees with Warren and believes that the townspeople's feeling for Emily is contradictory. Nevertheless, I argue that this self-contradictory feeling is mainly attributed to the townspeople themselves, and Emily is the victim of their intense scrutinization throughout the whole story.

In "A Rose for Emily", there are four main confrontations between the townspeople and Emily which occur at the several junctions including Emily father's death, the arrival of Homer Barron, the purchase of poison, and the death of Emily. However, it should be noted that in the story of "A Rose for Emily", it does not unfold

chronologically. In this essay, to make the explanation clear, the author would analyse these confrontations in a chronological order. The timeline in this essay is based on the graph charted by Robert H. Woodward [8]. From these confrontations, we could find that Emily wholly vanquishes the townspeople and is not understood by the townspeople. Also, the feeling they have during these confrontations is twofold. They respect Miss Emily, and regard her as an unapproachable idol, while they feel superior to Emily and attempt to interfere with her life.

This essay proposes that in the townspeople's imagination, Emily is the incarnation of the Old South. On the one hand, when they try to understand Emily, they take Emily the representative of the old aristocratic class. To some extent, Emily is dehumanized, so it is difficult for them to understand Emily. On the other hand, the southerners have a self-contradictory feeling for the Old South. They want the South to accomplish modernization. Meanwhile, they miss the old traditions. As the incarnation of the Old South, it is natural that they harbour a mixed feeling for Miss Emily.

2. THE FOUR CONFRONTATIONS

In the narration of "A Rose for Emily", there are four main confrontations, which occur at different junctions, including the death of Emily father, the arrival of Homer Barron, the purchase of poison, and the death of Emily herself. Before analysing, the first point needed to be made is that the story is told by indeterminate narrators rather than only one person, because there is frequent emergence of "we" and "us" in the story. And the second point is that the age of these narrators is uncertain, but they are older than the new generation and younger than Emily [1]. Therefore, they would record the whole life of Emily. In this part, it will analyse the four confrontations and the townspeople's ambivalence.

2.1. The First Confrontation

Before Emily father's death, he protected Emily and drove all the suitors away. Under the protection of her father, Emily lived a decent life. However, after her father's death, she had no one to depend on. At this time, the townspeople began to feel glad because they thought they could pity Miss Emily, and the narrators explain that Emily, "being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized", and had to "cling to that which had robbed her, as people will". [7] The townspeople are glad that Emily would not act as if she is above them, and she would become approachable. Without the protection of her father, Emily would not belong to the aristocratic class, and she cannot compete with them in the ordinary life. Witnessing the collapse of the old aristocratic class gives them a sense of superiority. Emily, however, recovered herself after some time, and continued to live her previous life. Therefore, in the first confrontation, Emily vanquishes the townspeople of Jefferson.

2.2. The Second Confrontation

In the summer of Emily father's death, the construction company came to pave the sidewalks. Homer Barron, one of them, encountered with Emily, and developed feelings for her. The feeling of the townspeople about their love affair is complexed. On the one hand, they hope the two could get married, and their marriage proves that Miss Emily is the common people, too. From this, Emily is equal to them. On the other hand, people, especially the old people, show pity for Miss Emily. As the incarnation of the Old South, she should not and cannot marry a man from the labor class of the North. This is not only the disgrace to Emily, but to the whole townspeople because they and their ancestors would lose nobleness. Therefore, they thought of her kin in Alabama and hoped that her kin could come to persuade her. For Emily, their interests or disappointment did not affect Emily's normal life at all and she "carried her head high enough" [7]. When Emily went out to buy man's silver toilet set and the complete outfit of man's clothing, they assumed that they were to be married, and believed that after Homer's return, they would get united. However, the ending of the story would astonish the whole town's people.

2.3. The Third Confrontation

One day, during Homer's leaving, Emily went out to buy poison, which was the third battle happening between the townspeople and Emily. In this battle, Emily totally vanquished the druggist and the whole town. Faced with the constant inquiry of the druggist, Emily just responded that she wanted the arsenic, and refused to answer the use of it. All she said is "I want some poison", "I want the best you have. I don't care what kind", "Arsenic, is that a good one?", and "I want arsenic", and her face looked like "a

strained flag" [7]. In the end, the druggist chose not to come back to confront with Emily. To some extent, the druggist represents those who keep an eye on Emily.

In the next few days, the townspeople made a guess that Emily would kill herself because they thought that Emily's love affair with Homer was "a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people". [7] In their minds, the death of Emily is the best result of this incident. They prefer the death of Emily than the humiliation to the nobleness of their ancestors and the Old South. Therefore, the maintenance of Old South's nobleness outweighs Emily's life. It seems that the townspeople would win in this confrontation. Nevertheless, Emily continued to live her isolated life and disappointed them.

After some time, when the smell developed, they believed it was the chance of Emily's collapse, and they could approach Emily, so the narrators describe that "It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons". [7] When the four men crossed Miss Emily's lawn and sprinkled lime, it is the signal that the townspeople can control Emily's life, and become the fathering role like Colonel Sartoris. However, the upright and motionless torso of Emily sitting behind a window proves that the townspeople will not and cannot be equal or superior to her.

Years later, the similar scene happened again. When the new generation grew up and were in office, they sent a tax deputation to collect taxes. But Emily's motionless figure, arrogant attitude and dry, cold voice made the deputation halt their request. Therefore, the narration goes "So SHE vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before the smell". [7] In short, in the third confrontation, Emily defeats the townspeople once again.

2.4. The Fourth Confrontation

After quitting the teaching of china-painting, Emily's house remained close, and she passed from generation to generation. Emily, the guardian of the aristocracy, lived with isolation and pride, which "can twist the individual into a sort of monster, but, at the same time, this refusal to accept the herd values carries with it a dignity and courage" [7]. Therefore, after the death of Emily, the townspeople went to Emily's funeral, they were out of respectful affection and curiosity. They show respect for Emily because they regard Emily as the tableau of the Old South. Meanwhile, Emily, passing from the old times with eccentricity and queerness, rouses the curiosity of the townspeople who wonder what her life is.

In the end, when the townspeople stepped into this mysterious house, watched the long-awaiting scene, and opened the upstairs room which had not been opened for forty years. They waited for the uncovering of the mystery. Instead, they found a bigger mystery: the fleshless corpse of Homer Barron. This scene makes them keep still and speechless and leaves them with various questions. Did she kill Homer Barron by herself or with her old servant? How? When? Has she slept with the corpse for forty years

or not? Did she really love Homer Barren? What was her motive of killing Homer Barron?...

For the townspeople, the death of Emily is the turning point because they could understand her life through looking her mysterious residential house. However, when the narration reaches to the end, we could find that they cannot understand and defeat Miss Emily even after her death. Although Emily is under the townspeople's intense scrutiny, she remains a mystery to the townspeople before and after her death.

From the above analysis, we could find that Emily totally vanquishes the townspeople even though she was dead. But why the townspeople are defeated in the above four confrontations and why they hold self-contradictory feeling for Emily.

3. THE CONTRADICTION FEELING FOR EMILY

After the explanation of the four confrontations, this part would show the reasons of why the townspeople are defeated in the above confrontations and why they have the ambivalent feelings for Emily.

3.1. The Incarnation of the Old South

The vanquishment of the townspeople in the four confrontations mainly because they regard Emily as the incarnation of the Old South. On the one hand, in the story's narration, Emily resists all the changes and new things. On the other hand, the attitude of the townspeople across generations reflects their dehumanization of Emily. In "A Rose for Emily", she is taken as the incarnation of the old South, which can be seen from her refusal to accept new things. She refuses the free postal delivery, refuses to redecorate her century-old house which is incompatible with the surroundings. Since the house is the symbolization of Emily herself, the old, dusty, and outdated house symbolizes that Emily is stubborn, out of times, and seems incongruous in the Post-War Era. The other evidence is that Emily refuses to accept the social reform because she keeps a negro servant after the abolition of slavery system in 1863. The servant, Tobe, serves his owner wholeheartedly for several decades. He looks after Emily's basic needs without any complaint, and more importantly, he hides all the things occurred in this house to protect his owner's reputation. After Emily's death, he chooses to leave than telling the townspeople's truth when encountering with the ladies at the entrance. The typical old-fashioned lifestyle of Emily reflects the pre-war living conditions of the southerners. Thus, it is not exaggerated that Emily is the incarnation of the Old South, and to a certain degree, she is the representative of the old aristocratic class.

As said earlier, the age of the narrators is older than the new generation and younger than Emily, so they could continuously have the intense scrutiny across generations.

The townspeople's scrutiny is so close that they could know Emily's upstairs house has not been opened for forty years. Emily's whole life is intensely scrutinized, discussed, and even interfered by the townspeople. Therefore, to some extent, her life is public, even communal [7]. Emily, as an individual, this kind of intrusive scrutiny for her is abnormal, so Ruth Sullivan believes that the townspeople are voyeurs [1] which is similar with that of a small Sicilian town in the film of *Malèna*. For both Emily and *Malèna*, this kind of scrutiny is the reflection of the townspeople's dehumanization towards them.

Also, we could find the evidence of their dehumanization across generations of the townspeople. For the older generation, the dehumanization could be seen in the tax exemption. In the beginning of the third paragraph, the narrators start with "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town". [7] Then, it follows with "...in 1884 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor --who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron--remitted her taxes". [7] In this sentence, it is the Colonel who "fathered" the law, not "promulgated" or "issued". That is, the old hierarchical order in the South remained, and the power of the local authority is still bigger than law. Then, "Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town... preferred this way of paying". [8] From this, the word "invented" proved the former assumption, which is that the personal power outweighs the law. With close reading, we could find that the living of Emily after her father's death is no better than the Negro woman, so the Colonel had to invent a tale to remit her law, which becomes a duty and an obligation, because he has to do this. The main motive of this tale is not out of sympathy or affection, but "based more on the maintenance of a rigid class order". [9] For the mayor, Emily is not an individual woman, but the representation of the aristocratic class, so he has the obligation or duty to care for Emily to maintain the Old South's social order, and after Colonel Sartoris's death, this obligation is left to the next generation.

In the new younger generation's minds, Emily's house is the eyesore of the eyesores, which means that her house is out of scale with the surrounding garages and cotton gins. As mentioned above, the house is the symbol of Emily. Which is to say, Emily herself is the eyesore among them. Why should they think like that? This essay argues that they do not take Emily as an individual, but as the representative of the Old South. The old and obsolete aristocracy is incompatible with the New Burgeoning Post-Civil War Era.

From Emily's refusal to accept the new things and the attitude of the old and new generations for her, we could conclude that Emily is regarded as the incarnation of the Old South, and that's why they are defeated once again in the four confrontations.

3.2. The Reflection of the Townspeople's Feeling for the Old South

After the abolition of the slavery system and the Civil War, the southerners are concerned about the destination of the South. They hope the south could keep up with the north, accomplish the industrialization and urbanization as soon as possible. Meanwhile, they cherish the memory of the Old Good South including the slavery system, the unique aristocracy, and the proud agricultural economy. Therefore, they are happy to witness the great change after the abolition of slavery and the rapid emergence of the factories, accept new ideas from the North. The old traditions of the South are gradually forgotten by the southerners. But at the same time, they know they should not and cannot totally abandon the old traditions, because these are the treasures left by their ancestors. To sum up, their feelings toward the South are contradictory.

As the incarnation of the Old South, the townspeople have contradictory feeling for Emily. With the rapid change of the outside world, Emily still lives the old-fashioned life. The queerness and eccentricity of Emily earn her the respect of the townspeople because she could resist the change and remain the cherished characters of the Old South such as loyalty and obstinateness. However, Emily, as the incarnation of the Old South, lives in the outdated house and was isolated from the outside world. Her resistance and stubbornness represent her refusal to the progress, which is opposite to the social trends. In this sense, the collapse of her house, herself, and the aristocratic class is unavoidable, which gives the townspeople a sense of superiority. Therefore, they show both admirable respect and triumphant superiority for Emily.

To some extent, the contradictory feelings of Emily is the reflection of their attitude towards the Old South. They show respect to the long-standing traditions; at the same time, they want to get rid of the backward agricultural economy.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay argues that the townspeople's contradictory feeling for Emily reflected in the four confrontations express their attitudes towards the Old South. When they cast off the restraints of the Old South, they find that these restraints are also part of their culture. The ambivalence of Emily is the concretization of their confused attitudes towards the destination of the South. In this sense, Emily, under the intrusive scrutiny of the townspeople, is both the idol and the scapegoat.

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