

A Study of “Southern Complex” in William Faulkner’s A Rose for Emily

Liu Qingchen

Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

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Abstract: A Rose for Emily is William Faulkner’s most critical short story in expressing the “Southern complex”. The characters in the story can be divided into two categories in their attitude towards the “Southern Complex”. The first type is represented by the older generation and the black people, who always shows their blind worship to everything in the old South. The second group is made up of the new generation and Emily, who tries to break through the old Southern system while also being dominated by it. By telling Emily’s tragic story, Faulkner not only unveils the veil of the “Southern Complex”, but also profoundly reflects on the old Southern traditions and people’s conventional ideas.

1. Introduction

When it comes to South American literature during the 20th century, William Faulkner, winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature, can be seen as one of the most brilliant stars beyond doubt. As Li Wenjun, the first Chinese scholar of Faulkner, once said, “The cultural traditions and values of the land where the author grew up always influence the content, theme and stance of his works (46).” Through painting a vivid picture of the real life and winding fate of the people in the South after the American Civil War, Faulkner fully demonstrated their conflicting thoughts and contradictory feelings under the impact of various forces in such a transition period. In his famous short story, A Rose for Emily, by showing two main types of “Southern Complex” that different characters had, Faulkner was in part sending a “rose” to remember the culture and history of his hometown. At the same time, however, he could consciously keep a distance from the Old South, objectively reflecting on and criticizing its backward social regulations and most people’s lagging ideas.

2. The Origin and Background of the “Southern Complex” phenomenon

In fact, “Southern Complex” has been gradually produced and developed within a specific historical context. As a distinctive region, the South set apart from the rest of the United States by its unique culture, traditions, and history, which was once home to both the harshest slavery and the most glamorous aristocratic life. However, after the Civil War, the society in the southern United States underwent significant changes. The South was confronted with serious economic downturn, escalating racial tensions, and a power shift from the older guard to the newer generation. Moreover, the traditional cultural heritage of the southern region was also at risk of extinction due to the impact of modern industrial civilization.

By the 1920s, many American writers had ceased to blindly uphold Southern cultural traditions. As Southerners, on the one hand, they loved the land of the South deeply, including its spirit and glorious past. But at the same time, they also rejected certain cultural traditions that are antithetical to human nature, such as slavery and patriarchy. As a well-known Southern writer, Faulkner keenly captured the ambivalence experienced by Southerners (including himself) in the aftermath of the war, skillfully portraying an authentic depiction of post-war life in the South. Many of Faulkner's characters are representatives of the cultural traditions of the Old South; however, this does not imply that he advocated for all aspects of Southern cultural traditions, even the regressive ones. Such ambivalence of love and hate motivated Faulkner to seek a deeper understanding of reality and delve into the nature of the "Southern Complex" through his characters.

3. The Sheer "Southern Complex" of the Older Generation and Black People

Above all, in this story, all the people in this town can be basically divided into two groups, according to the degree to which their "Southern Complex" is influenced by the old Southern culture: the older generation and the new generation. And primarily, the first group of people with sheer "Southern Complex" are made up of the older generation and black people.

The older generation always blindly shows their respect to Emily throughout and unconditionally upholds her illogical privileges as they find it hard to tear themselves away from the old days. In their opinions, Emily can be regarded as a "monument" or the spirit of the Old South, "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town". At the beginning of the story, it is mentioned that in 1894, Colonel Sartoris, one of the representatives of the older generation, remitted Emily's taxes by "inventing an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying". But nowadays, even though time has changed and her life has been decaying, the older generation still takes her condescending attitude and "upper" status as granted, protecting her decency and dignity in a very gentle way. Later in the story, despite constant complaints from neighbours about Emily's house, eighteen-year-old Justice Stevens still claimed that it was absolutely unacceptable to "accuse a lady of having a bad smell on her face", and finally he decided to send four men secretly "to sprinkle lime in all the outbuildings". Another example is that "the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries were sent" to Emily, "when she was about forty, during which she gave lessons in china-painting". It can be seen that although the noble privilege has lost the soil of reality, the old Southern culture still retains a strong inertia in the ideas of the older generation and permeates their daily life.

Black people are another important group of people who own such kind of blind "Southern Complex". After being exploited and oppressed for hundreds of years, black people themselves have already internalized and legalized such unfair treatments unconsciously. Even slavery has already been abolished, Emily's slave Tobe is still willing to serve her faithfully until her death. "Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket." He chooses to do so only because the "Southern Complex" is deeply rooted in his heart, but not out of friendship, responsibility or anything else. "He talked to no one, probably not even to Emily." Similarly, other black characters in the story are also mute from start to finish, such as those Negro women who "should not appear on the streets without an apron", those niggers brought by the construction company, and the Negro delivery boy. The power of slavery is so great and far-reaching that it makes the oppressed willingly marginalized, even rationalizing the fact that they are treated as silent "mules".

4. The Conflicting “Southern Complex” of the New Generation and Emily

Emily and the narrators of the text belong to the second group of Southerners, who are trying to break through the old Southern system while also being dominated by it.

Admittedly, Emily shows a certain degree of resistance to the old Southern culture in various ways. For instance, many villagers are under the impression that the Grierson family have such a high opinion of themselves that they will not “think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer”. Whereas, to everyone’s surprise, every Sunday afternoon Emily “drives in the yellow-wheeled buggy” with Barron. And it seems she “forgets her noblesse oblige” and determines to marry him, which can be considered as “a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people”. However, in the face of other people’s gossip, the Baptist minister’s interview, and the strong dissuasion of her noble cousins, she still chooses not to suppress her desire for her own happiness, tenaciously struggling with the deep-rooted traditional consciousness around her[1].

Nonetheless, there are also some insuperable limitations of Emily’s “Southern Complex”. At that time, Calvinism held an important position, exerting its dominance over the politics, economy, and culture of the American South. Deeply influenced by Calvinism, patriarchy has become a deep-ingrained cultural tradition in the South, greatly impacting this region’s mindset. In this story, Mr. Grierson, Emily’s father, embodies a “despotic ruler” while Emily is a victim of patriarchal oppression. Throughout her life, she has never managed to escape the shadow of patriarchy and the trap of “Southern ladyhood”. Emily and her father have long been considered a “picture” — “Emily is a white figure with a slender silhouette in the foreground, with her back to her, clutching a riding crop.” Even though her father has driven so many young men away, which directly leads to her lifelong loneliness and mental deformity, she still “clings to him”, deceiving herself and refusing to dispose his body after he died. What’s more, she has spent more than 40 years with Barron’s corpse, trying to hold on to the love she should have deserved, but which her father and the townspeople have destroyed. In fact, she has fallen into the “swamp” of the past, and that’s why she tries so hard to blur the boundary between the past and the present. For example, she not only keeps the habit of writing “on the paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink”, but also refuses to “fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it”. Besides, she always carries her head high enough, “as if she demands more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness.” In order to protect the last vestiges of pride and self-respect left to her from Southern tradition, she never explains herself to others, and she is even willing to resort to evil deeds in an attempt to stop the passing of time, even though it is sure to be in vain. Eventually, her old-fashioned, incomplete “Southern Complex” leads to her lamentable ending of becoming a victim of the historical transition[2].

Moreover, the narrator of the text, “we”, is the direct embodiment of the second group of Southerners. Notice that it is a serious misreading to think that “we” refer to the entire town. In fact, “we” represent the new generation in town, who own the “Southern Complex” of contradictions similar to Emily’s. On the one hand, they regard themselves more enlightened than the older generation. They think the ridiculous excuse for the tax exemption for Emily can be only invented by “a man of Colonel Sartoris’ generation, and only a woman could have believed it”. According to a member of the rising generation, “it is simple enough to send her word to have her place cleaned up”. Besides, when “the newer generation becomes the backbone and the spirit of the town”, the grown-up painting pupils no longer send their own children to Emily’s class. The domination of the new generation by the culture of the old South has markedly weakened. Generally, they have shrugged off the blind “Southern Complex” of the older generation. And they attempt to rely on the power of the law and the authorities to remove Emily’s unreasonable privileges.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that their introspection still has its limitations. Theoretically,

the deputation that consists of several young males is more dominant than Emily, old and frail, in numbers, gender, and age. Nevertheless, they are all refuted by the sentence “I have no taxes in Jefferson” repeated by Emily four times. Therefore, intellectually speaking, “we” go further than the older generation and dare to reflect on many irrationalities of the existing system. However, “we” ourselves seem to subconsciously agree with Emily and are powerless to radically change the situation.

In effect, Faulkner’s criticism of the “Southern Complex” is mainly accomplished through the unreliable narration of the new generation in the text. For example, the narrators say that Emily looks like a beautiful girl, “with a vague resemblance to those angles in colored church windows”. But meanwhile, they also describe her as “a fat woman”, “like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue”. Sometimes they call her “poor Emily” and “feel really sorry for her”, while sometimes they keep gossiping and say that “it would be the best thing for her to kill herself”. It is the self-contradictory narrative that can cause readers to examine and reflect on the “Southern Complex” that people universally have in that special period [3].

5. Conclusion

Faulkner once said, “We love Mississippi, including its habits, customs, land and people... But we had better worry, too, that we have been wrong, that what we love and protect not only does not need, but does not deserve to be loved and protected (Karl, 865).”

The romantic image “rose” in the title actually implies Faulkner’s complicated and contradictory “Southern Complex”. For one thing, the rose here represents the author’s remembrance of Miss Emily and his deep sympathy for her tragic experience. For another, he entrusts the rose with Southern people’s universal reminiscence and mourning for the past order, traditions and values of the South. Yet Faulkner still successfully uses his power of rationality to override his sensibility. By telling Emily’s tragedy, he not only resolutely unveils the veil of the “Southern Complex”, but also profoundly reflects on the maladies of the old Southern society.

References

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