

Spectators and Supporters: Image of Bystanders in Faulkner's Short Stories

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Abstract: *Dry September* and *A Rose for Emily* are two of Faulkner's most famous short stories and have similarities in both content and theme. This essay starts from the concept of the image of onlookers that Chinese readers are more familiar with and then proposes the image of bystanders in two short stories. Focusing on the core events of the short stories, this essay first analyzes how the bystanders became the critics, admirers, supporters, and so-called friends of the main character, then discusses their functions as narrators, and therefore, tries to explain why Faulkner created the image of bystanders in his short stories.

1. Introduction

Reading Faulkner's works is not an easy task. His stories are simultaneously suffocatingly atmospheric and poetically painted, with seemingly chaotic events and moments of inevitability. In the closed houses and big plantations, Faulkner outlines one after another sharp but touching "Southern story" for us [1]. Through these stories, he shows readers the cramped, dark, wet, but also bright aspects of human nature. His writing represents not only the South of the United States, but also the world. As the first modernist novel writer in the American, Faulkner won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature for his powerful and artistic contribution to modern American novels [2]. Faulkner said in his award-receiving speech that "I believe that man will not merely endure: He will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things." Faulkner not only wrote the world-famous novel such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, but he was also very accomplished in short stories such as *A Rose for Emily*, *Dry September* and *The Evening Sun*, etc .

The challenge of reading Faulkner stems from the irreconcilable tension between his writing technique and subject matter. While reading Faulkner's short stories, the whisper of the small-town residents who stand by the main characters and watch closely and gossip quietly left me deep impression. Their attitude towards the protagonist does not seem to be friendly concern, but a kind of cold attitude with curiosity. Critics believe that Faulkner's works reflect both his nostalgia for the American South and criticism of issues at that time [3]. Faulkner said when he was asked by a reporter in Japan: "If you had to classify me into a school, I would be humanitarian" [4]. Faulkner has deep sympathy and pity for his protagonists, whether they are black or white. Since Faulkner's works entered China, Chinese scholars have analyzed the significance of female characters,

narrative techniques, images, and metaphors in his short stories from the perspectives of modernism, postmodernism, postcolonial theory, etc [5][6]. On the other hand, foreign scholars have opened up critic views such as new media ecology, landscape, images of chess, and lawyer images from the perspectives of media studies and cultural studies [7]. However, few scholars have analyzed bystanders or small characters in the novels or short stories when studying Faulkner's works and thoughts. Faulkner once said that not a word of a short story should be wasted. So why does the author write about these bystanders when the number of words is limited in short stories? Who are these indifferent bystanders? Why did Faulkner, who had strong sympathy for the South and was full of hope for humanity, create these bystanders who have indifferent attitudes? This essay attempts to answer these questions by analyzing two short novels—*Dry September* and *A Rose for Emily*—that represent the highest achievement of Faulkner [8] and from the perspective of the image of bystanders appearing in the text.

2. The Existence of “Bystanders”

Before we start discussing bystanders, we first need to unify the definition of bystanders. For Chinese readers, “onlookers” may be a more familiar form than “bystanders”. One of the most famous writers who constructed the image of onlookers is Lu Xun, but actually, long before Lu Xun, Liang Qichao had explained that the psychology of onlookers are gratified by others' misfortunes. Many short stories of Lu Xun have the image of onlookers. For example, people who watched Xia Yu's execution indifferently in *Medicine* and people who listened to and amused themselves at Sister Xianglin's tragic stories, etc. Later, Chinese writers such as Shen Congwen and Mo Yan, inherited and developed the image of onlooker [9][10]. Although the onlookers in these different writers have their own focus and play different functions, they all share the following characteristics: (1) is a member of a particular area; (2) does not have a deliberate desire to change the life of the protagonist, but his or her actions more or less affect the protagonist; (3) watches usually for his or her own amusement or benefit; and (4) usually does not have a specific name or recognizable identity. In Faulkner's two short novels, the characters of the onlookers meet the above four conditions, but due to the different social background in China and the United States, onlookers in two countries literary are not the same. Thus, this essay chooses to use the term “bystanders” to refer to those onlookers in *A Rose for Emily* and *Dry September*.

2.1. Criticize or Adore—Emily's Spectator

The bystanders in *A Rose for Emily* can be divided into two categories, the critical one and the adoring one.

The main group represented by the critical bystander is the women of the small town in the novel. The plots in which they appear in the text are as follows: (a) When Miss Emily died, the women went to her house for mourning, but they were motivated by curiosity to see the inside of her house. (b) After Homer Barron left Emily, she hardly left the house. At this time, a few ladies went to visited her, but were not received. (c) Later, a strange smell came out from Emily's house, and some ladies, while ostensibly criticizing the Negro servant's incompetence of keep the house clean, complained about the stench of Emily's house. They said, “Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly [11:52].” When the smell got worse, a woman neighbor complained to 80-year-old judge about sending Emily word to stop the smell in accordance with the law. (d) When Emily's father died, all the women were “prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid [11:54]”. (e) When Miss Emily became intimate with Yankee Homer Barron, all the ladies said, “Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day labour” [11:57]. (e) When Emily still went out Sunday afternoon with Homer with glittering and buggy, some of the ladies began to say, “It was a disgrace to the town and a bad example for the young people” and forced the minister to

call upon Emily. (f) Then, Emily never went out of the house again until she died. When she died, the Negro servant stood at the door to meet the women and men who came to offer their condolences. Seeing Miss Emily lying beneath flowers, the ladies “sibilant and macabre”.

If we put the above (abcdef) in chronological order (debcfa), we would find that the women/ladies in the town, except for the attending of Grierson family’s funeral, kept watching with curiosity and expressing their opinions on Emily’s behavior from time to time. Even when Miss Emily was having a hard time (old and alone), they still went out of their way to complain to a quite old judge. Their behavior is rather similar to Chinese old sayings as “kick one when one is down” or “watch from a safe distance when others are in danger”. What they cared about was not Miss Emily, but whether or not Emily fulfilled the criteria of a Southern lady in their minds. If she did, they watched in silence; if she didn’t, they would try to set a standard of their idea of what a Southern lady—Miss Emily—should be. In short, by criticizing Emily, they shaped their own identity.

The other type of bystanders who admire Miss Emily are the men of Emily’s age in the town, or “older people” or “older men” in the text. They watched Miss Emily’s behavior too, but unlike the critical bystanders analyzed in the previous section, they did not blame Miss Emily or make a big deal out of it, as if they were a group of devoted fans. When Miss Emily falls in love with the Northerners, they say that “even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige—without calling it noblesse oblige”. When Miss Emily’s house smelled bad, the men chose to sneak into her house secretly after midnight to spread lime to solve this problem; and in the daytime, they would cover their mouths and say, “poor Emily”. When Miss Emily died, the men “through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, some of them even wore “brushed Confederate uniforms” [11:74]. In the eyes of the adoring spectators, Miss Emily was tradition, the South, and their standard. They admired her when she was a represent of tradition and lamented her when she turning her back on it. To sum up, Miss Emily serves as an embodiment of tradition and a symbol of duty. The attention paid to her has achieved her status but also shaped her chains.

2.2. Minnie’s Friends and McLendon’s Supporters

The bystanders in *Dry September* are simpler than in *A Rose for Emily*, since they clustered around McLendon and Miss Minnie Cooper, forming two “groups”. Different from spectators in *A Rose for Emily*, the bystanders in *Dry September* act positively in the story, as if they were supporters or good friends of McLendon and Minnie.

The image of bystander who surrounded Miss Minnie behaved as faithful friends. After Will Mayes, a black man, was lynched by white it seemed as if Minnie’s status as a rape victim was confirmed. That Sunday evening, Minnie felt her own flesh was fever. Even though she had not dressed up yet, her friends called for her asking her whether she felt strong enough to go out. However, the real thing they care about was whether they had chance to get the newest and truest information (gossip) from Minnie. Even so, Minnie still wanted to get out on the streets, and her friends went along with her, swarming her and assisting her as she walked across the square and to the theatre. After the movie, they took her home in a taxi, undressed her, cooled her body, and called the doctor. But their “bright eyes glittering in the dark” revealed their gossip-consuming bystander nature. Interspersed with the series action of caring towards Minnie was actually probe for information: “When you have had time to get over the shock, you must tell us what happened. What he said and did, everything” [11:76]. Before that, the aging Minnie had long been left behind and uncared for by her playmates. When they saw Minnie, who has been out of the spotlight for years, regaining the attention of men on the street, the women excitedly confirm with each other, “Do you see?” When Minnie has gone into a state mixed with bursting laughter and moaning, her friends were still looking for Minnie’s grey hairs while asking each other: “Do you suppose

anything really happened” with their eyes darkly aglitter, secret, and passionate.

On the other hand, it is another picture when we look at the bystanders who surrounded McLendon: they took advantage of the right opportunity but were rather slow to act. When McLendon was gathering those who wanted to go with him to catch Will at the barbershop, most men were still hesitant to follow. “The remainder sat uncomfortable, not looking at each other, then one by one they rose and joined him.” When this group of men arrived at Will’s workplace, none of them wanted to make the first act. It was not until McLendon struck the nigger, the rest of them “expelled their breath in a dry hissing and struck him with random blows”. These McLendon supporters didn’t care about right and wrong. To them, the fact—whether or not Minnie was raped by Will—was not important at all. Like their hesitation at the beginning, they could either go along with McLendon and beat up the nigger, or they could stay in the barbershop and lament “Jees Christ”. The choice was up to them, but they were caught up in the atmosphere, and the rules of Southern society told them to follow McLendon.

3. Bystanders as Narrators

In the previous section, we proposed and analyzed the image of bystanders in two of Faulkner’s short stories by borrowing the image of onlookers in Chinese literature. It can be seen that the image of the spectator in both short stories is rather negative portrait, and their characters are characterized as apathetic, numb, and small-town southern residents who are entertained by other people’s sufferings. So, did Faulkner create these group portraits merely for the purpose of condemning the public? The answer is clearly no.

First, the image of bystanders in Faulkner’s works not only serve as bystanders themselves in terms of content, but also play a part of the narrative function. In *A Rose for Emily*, the whole story about Miss Emily took place in a long-closed house. Normally, no one would know what happened to her, but the reader feels like watching and listening to Emily all the time, that is the effect made by bystander narrator. In terms of point of view, Faulkner sometimes employed omniscient narration, sometimes utilizes interior and external focusing. Moreover, he mixed used talking-character and reflector-character as narrator [12]. The talking-character narrated the story as if he or she was talking a piece of news; while the reflector-character witnessed the actions of protagonist directly which created an effect that the readers are inside of the narrator’s body and observe the world in the novel through the narrator’s eyes. The pronouns “we” and “they” appeared frequently in *A Rose for Emily*. “We” represents the talking-character, while “they” represents the reflector-character. Within the two types of bystanders, the adoring bystanders is closer to the reflector-character who presented Emily in an implicit way to the reader, while the critical bystanders may be closer to the talking-character. Therefore, the creation of bystanders made the short story complex and multi-layer. In *Dry September*, as the plot develops step by step, readers seem to be participants around McLendon and Minnie. Although the central point of the whole story—whether the rape happened or not, and what McLendon did to Will after he found him—was not explicitly written by the author, we as readers are able to make some guess. Ernest Hemingway said in *Death in the Afternoon* that: If a writer has a clear idea of what he wants to write, he can leave out what he knows. All it takes is for the writer to write truthfully, and the reader will feel strongly about what he has omitted, as if the writer had already written it. Although Faulkner leaved out the image of the lynching of the blacks by the whites, by depicting McLendon and the group of supporters around him, we can think of the outcome of Will’s tragic and unfortunate death.

At the same time, bystanders also make the narration of the short stories more vivid. For example, through the previous discussion of *A Rose for Emily*, we can find that the bystanders’ behaviors and words showed that the narration of the story and the development of the event were opposite in order, which formed a structure like “hui” in Chinese character [13]. In addition, this is

also in line with the concept of “anachronics” proposed by the French narratologist Genette[14:297].

4. Conclusions

The modern novel, though born in a world that has lost its own real value and meaning, is shouldered with the mission of caring for every individual's journey of finding his or her meaning of existence [14:301]. Such bystanders in *Dry September* and *A Rose for Emily* have no specific identity of their own, but only nouns like “friends”, “the first”, “the second”, “the drummer”, “the youth”, “the barber”, etc. However, these bystanders had their own way of thinking: some of them admired, some of them criticized, some of them followed the trend, and some of them watched and amused. These bystanders are exactly what Faulkner cares about and portraits of every ordinary person in the real Southern United States at that time: the whites' disregard for the lives of the blacks, their high opinion about themselves based on their imagination of the ideal South, and their bashing and resistance to the North. In its function of “knowing people”, Faulkner's novel actually promotes readers' ability to “know oneself”. Instead of presenting all the characters, the author used many techniques to present figures from various perspectives to enlighten the readers to compare themselves and the characters in the novel, which ultimately inspired the readers to know themselves. Faulkner presented the characters he knew in different ways to the reader, who sees and empathizes with the characters as the author does. Therefore, the purpose of Faulkner's short stories was not only to criticize the problems of Southern society but also to transform the reader from an indifferent bystander to a conscious self-activator, i.e., a self-knowing and self-made person.

To summarize, in *Dry September* and *A Rose for Emily*, the author seems to portray a negative image of bystanders which contradicts Faulkner's compassionate attitude, but he was inspiring and enlightening the reader. In the image of bystanders, we could see Faulkner's sympathy for the American blacks, his strong feelings towards Southern Americans, and his hope for the American South to bring out its own unity rather than being interfered with by the North. This is Faulkner's highest concern for humanity, the South, and America.

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