

Working through Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*—On Character and Character Portrayal

Jie Fang

Foreign Languages College, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China

Email: fangjie2005@hotmail.com

Abstract—William Faulkner's first published and still the best-known short story *A Rose for Emily* combined his artistic preoccupations and techniques to portray the character. The adoption of the conventional techniques and experimental devices depicts the complexity of the female psyche in decline and transition.

Index Terms—character, character portrayal, conventional technique, experimental device, female psyche

I. INTRODUCTION

Among all the American writers in 1930's, Faulkner's achievement was so prominent that none of his contemporaries could compare with him. While any account of Faulkner's achievement as a whole must make some acknowledgement of his mastery of the short story form. And these short stories are important in his career of the successive volumes.

"A Rose for Emily"(1930) is the first of Faulkner's short stories to be published and perhaps still the best-known. In it are examples of several of Faulkner's artistic preoccupations and techniques. He combines the conventional techniques and experimental devices to portray the character.

II. WAYS TO PORTRAY THE CHARACTER

Fiction writers have many ways to present character. The organization--brief telling followed by considerable showing--is common in fiction. The short story "A Rose for Emily" is a good example of this organization. Miss Emily is characterized first in a summary, a telling, and then by a series of anecdotes, a showing.

A. Conventional Techniques

1. Narrator

At the beginning of the story, the narrator, objectively, gives us information about Miss Emily's character--through the outside town-people's eyes, how they saw her and reacted to her: the whole town went to her funeral tells us that she was superior. To the men she seemed a fallen monument, which was the symbol of a tradition, a class, a way of life, and certain values. To the women she was mysterious and eccentric, resulted from her isolation. We may notice the "telling" is performed by a narrator who appears in the story only as a citizen of Jefferson. The frequent use of "we" instead of "I" is the representative of the collective opinion of the town people.

2. Setting

The setting is another way to tell the character. The general setting of the story is the town of Jefferson, survived from the civil war. Miss Emily is the last generation of a big family ruined by the war. We learn that her house stood in a decaying neighborhood.

"And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of starvation."

For Faulkner, such a setting provided a strong emotional background to narrate the story and the comparison of Emily with the brave soldiers also tells the distant, grand and ruined character. "The cedar-bemused cemetery" denotes the tranquil atmosphere created by the cedar trees in the cemetery.

The episode setting is the setting of her house and the inside of her house--where she spent most of her time in her life. "Garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the collon wagon and the gasoline pumps- an eyesore among eyesores." The heavily lightsome style of the seventies set with modern mechanization side by side, which is quite inharmoniously. The words "coquettish" and "decay" are disjunctive in that "coquetry" is usually associated with youth, whereas "decay" is usually a reminder of the old and of death. Their juxtaposition here hints at the bizarre and gloomy elements in the story. Another episode setting is inside her house, which no one save an old man-servant had seen in at least forty years. "It smelled of dust and disuse- a close, dark smell." The leather was cracked, the faint dust rose sluggishly, the easel is tarnished and gilt. All these indicate how stubbornly she clung to the nobleness and dignity. However, whatever stubborn she is, the generation represented by her has no vigor and hope, and doom to failure.

Then summary is given by the narrator--a brief account of Miss Emily's past and present sorry circumstance. "Alice, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care, a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town". Miss Emily is shaped by the social details of the changing town. The setting helps to portray the character with the ultimate purpose of rising theme.

3. Showing

Miss Emily is characterized mostly in showing. We know a character best from what that character does and says. Thus Miss Emily's dignity and pride, eccentricity and oddity, even independence and brevity are shown through dealing with the older men about tax-paying, with the druggist about poison with no extra explanation, and about post delivery, about refusal of cooperating with the modernization. Besides, she kept the father's portrait in a prominent place in her living room and resumed the tradition of a big family--she carries her head high in her dignity as the last Grierson; with her head high, she kept going out with Barron Homer. So many details are described within the short story, which will be combined in the subsequent analysis.

4. Flat or Round character

If we may adopt the English novelist E.M. Forster's distinction between "flat" characters and "round" ones, Miss Emily will certainly belong to the latter class. Usually a round character is dynamic or changing. It is common in a short story that the important event or crisis takes place on the protagonist and thus change the character's life. So the character must almost certainly be round. Usually such change occurs within the character, but sometimes, as in "A Rose for Emily", the change occurs within someone observing the action. We come to understand Emily as more complex than we had believed. We are left with mystery, with puzzlement over human behavior. We may ask ourselves why Miss Emily acted as she did, what motivated her to satisfy herself in a so horrible way.

The victim-Emily Grierson--was dominated by her father and his rigid ideas of social status. She has been prevented from marrying during the father's lifetime. The town people had long thought of them as a tableau.

"Miss Emily, a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip,..." and therefore after his death she is left alone and penniless. Her dependence on her father continues even after he dies, she refuses to release his body for burial, she keeps his portrait in a prominent place. Father's memory was the "pillar" in her spirit. Neither the town people nor the father regard Emily as a real normal woman. The father just kept her in house as his housekeeper or to say "slave". By her father, she was deprived of the right to have her own life. Inevitably, she can only put her desire and love on Homer--a Northern laborer. The love affair was interfered by the town people and the Baptist minister. She was only the symbol of past-tradition duty, hereditary obligation. Rather than lose his life she lost her father, she kills him in order to keep him, to get his eternal love, to live a normal life forever. Within the control and dominant of the family and old south convention, all her desire and hope were corrupted.

We may draw the omitted sentence in "Dry September" as the statement, "Life in such places is terrible for women." Life in all places is terrible for women. The Puritanism dominated over the old south for such a long time, which was even more puritanized than the puritan in New England. Together with the patriarchy convention and old moral value, they ruin and devastate the women deeply. This is one aspect that Faulkner tends to chastise. The humanist Faulkner saw that the twisted character of Emily had been formed by forces beyond her control. She is never laughed at or treated with contempt or disgust. She, one of human being-alone, boldly defied her community and fought against the norm and convention, which reminds us of Faulkner's implied attitude toward women. "No person is wholly good or wholly bad." said Faulkner himself, a view that implies the sympathetic reading is appropriate.

Some critics think conflict in the story arises between the doomed survivor of the old south and citizens of the new city that grows out of Reconstruction. Miss Emily's personal conflict with Homer Barron exemplifies the conflict. Because Barron is a Northerner, an employee to build Jefferson's first sidewalks, themselves signs of urbanization. Colonel Santoris and the later older man who protected Miss Emily, represented the old south. In the changing habits of the governors, we see a changing Jefferson, in Miss Emily we see the decadent past attempting to withstand change. The Emily-world is graceful, dignified honorable-quaint and decayed, finally morbid. The Barron-world is vital, vigorous and inevitable. In regard to this, Faulkner did not deny the two symbolic figures, but complemented "it's conflict between god and saton.". He said he was only writing about a real tragic character. So the story is not only depicting the decay of South, but also describes the conflict in a character's mind--the conflict against heart, fellow, and environment, the conflict against the past and against the present forces.

B. *Experimental Devices*

1. Gothic style

One of Faulkner's experimental prose device--Gothic style is reflected in the story through influenced by American novelist Allen Poe's successive combination of detective story is the subgroup of Roman works and is regarded as the demotic style, many serious even the first class writers and poems created the Gothic works or adopted the Gothic device. Faulkner is the best one to use this device to explore the psychological reality and delineate the evil inner world of the character. So in the aspect of examining the morality and social criticism, Faulkner is far better than Allen Poe. The short story "A Rose for Emily" is the typical example to use this technique among many of Faulkner's other Gothic novels, like "Sanctuary" "Light in August" "Go down, Moses".

The astonishing end of the story calls upon the readers to recollect and reorganize the anecdotes of Miss Emily. In

this mystery story, Faulkner gives us clues relied so that we do not know that they are clues. We accept Homer's disappearance without connecting it to rat prison or bad smells. It is true we do not consider Miss Emily the murdering kind, although she is regarded as bizarre, eccentric and twisted in mind. The shocking result once again leads us to investigate her evil side of the mind and the conflict of her psych. Why did Miss Emily murder Homer?--For the eternal love? Or for the sake of her dignity? Or just because of the necrophilia? More questions than answers will be got.

2. Point of view

The mystery and astonishing atmosphere is enhanced through the point of view that Faulkner adopted--from the collective town people's eye. So instead of omniscient speaker, the narrator has to keep certain distance from the character and let the character speak for herself, so as to give readers much room for imagination. Allowing the narrative establish the ambiguities and implications is "the possible evidence of Faulkner's growing sophistication as an artist" (see *The Achievement of William Faulkner*) to portray a character. In the published versions of "A Rose for Miss Emily", some functionless conversation was rejected from the pre-publication versions. The original conversation itself occupies rather more than two pages of typescript. Dying Emily talks of the shock the upstairs room. The Negro indicates that he knows what the room contains. And the Negro wants neither house nor money which was bequeathed to him according to the agreement they had made thirty-five years before. He would like to go back to the poorhouse, where he can sit and watch the trains go by. (see "The Achievement of William Faulkner")

The keeping of this material would have weakened the force of the final episode and delayed the climax. Besides, the direct presentation of Miss Emily and the insight into her personality and motive would have diminished the mystery and ambiguity created by the narrator. And one of the theme--withdraw into unreality and illusion--would also have been weakened. The advantage gained through omitting is obvious.

3. Handling of time

When experimental devices are mentioned, the handling of time in this story can not be left untouched, which is the special way to portray the character and strengthen the theme.

When we first read the story, we may feel there is no coherence, no order, even no emphasis, there are only random notes on an eccentric character. But this anthropological order seems natural, as if we are listening to someone's free recollections--the narrator adds some background details to what he is talking reminds him of something related. Until after we finish the whole story, the vague character and disordered plot seem clearer.

The disordered time sequence is another way to illustrate the Emily's timeless character and thus to serve the theme. Miss Emily could not make clear distinction between reality and illusion. She lived in the illusion of her father and her lover. She refused to accept any change brought by passage of time. It was for eternity that she kept her father's corpse from burying and killed her lover, not to mention her refusal of cooperation with modernization and mechanization. Time means nothing to her, but she could not escape from time and change. The color of her hair, the shape of her figure, her death and the Negro growing stooped little by little, all the things indicate in the structure of the story itself, one of the themes is illustrated and reinforced--"TIME".

III. CONCLUSION

All in all, in many ways, Faulkner provides us with more than external events and details; he also probes the inner lives of those who are trying to cope with the problem of a society in decline and transition. His artistic techniques--the exploration of psychological reality, the social structure and mores of a southern community, the nature of time, and the relation of the past to the present--depicts infinite variety of females which stimulate us more aware of the complexity of the female psyche.

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Jie Fang was born in Shandong, China in 1970. She received her M.A. degree in linguistics from Zhejiang University, China in 1999.

She is currently an associate professor in Foreign Languages College, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China. Her Research interests include Pragmatics and English teaching Methodology.