

The Tradition Defender—Three Women Characters in “There Was a Queen”

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Abstract—William Faulkner’s short story “There Was a Queen” has aroused increasing attention in recent years. Three women characters, Virginia, Narcissa and Elnora, live in this unmanned house and strive to protect the reputation of Sartoris family. As the tradition defender, they stick to the old tradition and sense of morality, repress their natural humanity and live a lonely and empty life until death. Faulkner strongly condemns the inhumane morality which demolishes the natural humanity and at the same time reveals the root of these women’s tragedy with deep sympathy.

Index Terms—the tradition defender, “There Was a Queen”, Virginia, Narcissa, Elnora, Sartoris family

I. INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner, winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize for literature, has made great and prominent contributions in American literature. The glory of his novels is so dazzling that his short stories are hidden behind. However, in recent years, his short stories have aroused more and more attention, as there are too many studies on his novels, and at the same time his short stories are considered artistic and valuable, especially his unique narrative skill. “There Was a Queen” is one of them. There are several scholars focusing on the narration of Elnora, considering her as an unreliable narrator. There are some critical interpretations based on feminism, and there is also a special comparison between the two women, Narcissa and Emily, the latter being a famous Southern lady in Faulkner’s another famous short story “A Rose for Emily”. However, these comments mainly focus on Virginia or Narcissa, ignoring an important little figure Elnora, who plays an important role in forming Faulkner’s viewpoint on women. Therefore, this paper is to interpret objectively and comprehensively these three women characters, Virginia, Narcissa and Elnora, and accordingly presents William Faulkner’s attitude towards women.

“There Was a Queen” was created in 1933 and originated from his novel Sartoris. The Sartoris family is a big and old one, but when the story happens, all the Sartoris men have died except the ten-year-old Benbow, Colonel John’s great-grandson. In the old house live Colonel John’s sister Virginia Du Pre, Benbow, his mother Narcissa, Elnora and her son and daughter. Virginia, also called Miss Jenny, came to her brother’s house for a shelter in 1869, after the Yankees killed her father and her husband and burned her house. She has been a widow for more than 60 years. Elnora, a proud Negro, is the daughter of Colonel John and a black woman and the half-sister of old Bayard, so Miss Jenny is actually her aunt, which can be a good explanation of her loyalty to Sartoris family and her contempt of Narcissa, although her secret identity is probably not known by anyone. Narcissa is longing for the recognition of Sartoris family, but she can not give up the physical desire as a common woman. In order to regain those love letters which are lost twelve years ago and keep the dignity of being a Sartoris woman, she has to go to Memphis to sleep with the Federal agent so that she can buy those letters back with her own body. After she returns, she does not immediately explain the sudden journey, and in the early afternoon she takes her son to go down across the pasture towards the creek. After Narcissa is back and changes her wet clothes, she comes to explain her sudden journey to Miss Jenny. At first Miss Jenny has thought that she might marry someone, even that Yankee, but her explanation makes her startled. After Narcissa confesses all of these things to Miss Jenny, this old woman passes away quietly.

These three women, to some extent, are worthy and pathetic. They live in this unmanned house in order to defend the old and decayed tradition, which symbolizes the Southern society and order, and at the same time they repress their natural humanity and come to the end of life in loneliness and emptiness.

II. VIRGINIA

Virginia Du Pre is now ninety years old and lives in a wheel chair. She came to her brother’s house for a shelter in 1869, after the Yankees killed her father and her husband and burned her house. She comes all the way from Carolina to Mississippi by herself. The war and tribulation do not defeat her but make her strong-minded, brave and determined and get out of crying. She can cry only before her own brother. She has lost most of the feminine style and hardened to be a Sartoris man. When she gets to know those anonymous and obscene letters to Narcissa, she would rather let the whole world know that somebody thought that way about her once and got horsewhipped than to have him keep on thinking that way about her unpunished. She chooses to resort to violence to solve problems like strong men. She has witnessed the death of her brother, her nephew, then her great-nephew and then her two great-grand-nephews. She has inherited the

Sartoris spirit and is a true noble Sartoris woman like those dead brave Sartoris men. But at last her inherent nature is revealed, and she is only a paper tiger with strong and fierce surface. She can never be changed into a real man, although she has been pretending to be the patriarch of the big family without men.

The beginning of the story is endowed with heavy and sad atmosphere, being written like this, "...he (John Sartoris) had died in it and his son Bayard had died in it, and Bayard's son John and John's son Bayard in turn had been buried from it even though the last Bayard didn't die there" (Faulkner, 1977, p.727). The writer does not say simply that all the Sartoris men have died, but applies very simple sentence structures repeatedly in order to reveal the same fact, and at the same time lets the old tradition known. These two names, John and Bayard, are passed down generation by generation, which are internalized as the honor and glory of their whole family. Therefore, Virginia persists in calling her great-great-grandson Johnny after his uncle rather than Benbow, who is the only inheritor of Sartoris family. She is internalized as the tradition defender, to be more precise, the tradition itself. She carries on the responsibility of keeping the order of Sartoris family and thinks of herself as the supervisor of order and morality.

Virginia is the queen of Sartoris family. She spends most of her life, especially the golden young life in making herself hardened and becoming the authority of Sartoris family, at the same time giving up all the happiness and desire. She has indulged in the old tradition and tried her best to keep the Southern society where it is, while time and society can not remain because of her personal consciousness, because the Southern society at that time is going to its end. In this short story, the colored glass and jasmine are mentioned several times, which Virginia brought to Mississippi from Carolina. This is a good proof of her valuing the old time.

In this unmanned house with no real patriarch, Virginia is actually the "father" of the family, and controls everything in her wheel chair, although she seems to lose contact with the outside world. She is, without any doubts, a gentle and noble lady. "She sat erect; a thin, upright woman with a delicate nose and hair the color of a whitewashed wall. About her shoulders lay shawl of white wool, no whiter than her hair against her black dress. She was looking out the window; in profile her face was high-arched, motionless" (Faulkner, 1977, p.730). Her appearance and clothes give a picture of a strong-minded and elegant lady, but at the same time with no energy to move forward. The comparison of white and black highlights the elegance and quietness. This is just the picture of Southern society, which has no power and room to fight against the progress of the time. On the other hand, she is the authority of the whole family. When Narcissa deals with the obscene letters, she tells Virginia and wants to know how a noble lady deals with that case. When Narcissa retrieves those letters by selling out her body, she confesses everything to her. In Narcissa's eyes, she is the supervisor and defender of Sartoris family and functions as patriarch of the family.

The black bonnet of an ancient shape is actually her crown as a queen, the third thing through which she can have something with the Old South, beside the colored glass and jasmine. When she became upset, she would place it on the exact top of her head and sit there by the window. And with this black bonnet she comes to the end of her life. After she knows the whole story about those obscene letters, she seems to be awakening and realize the hopelessness and helplessness women have to encounter under the control of patriarchy, especially when they have to solve problems by themselves. "Us poor, fool women" (Faulkner, 1977, p.741) in her "sharp, peremptory" (Faulkner, 1977, p.741) voice shows her last impotence. She has not any power to change the cruel reality, and not any energy to carry on the responsibility of being the patriarch any more. She is too tired and is passing away with no sound.

William Faulkner shows his admiration for Virginia, a worthy and noble Southern lady, a backbone of Sartoris family. She is persistent, strong-minded, self-disciplined and loyal to the social tradition and her own family. However, at the same time Faulkner shows his sympathy towards this great woman. In order to be the supervisor and defender of the family, she has been a widow for more than half a century. She has given up all inherent desire and carried on all the responsibility of being the "father" of the family, while finally she has realized women's helplessness.

III. NARCISSA

Narcissa is an orphan. She has only one brother who is also off to the war in France like her fiancé. She is only an ordinary perhaps pretty girl who has no social position, so in Elnora's eyes she has no quality to be a Sartoris member. It is this great disparity of position that makes her feel uncomfortable and lonely when she comes to the house. Maybe this is also the reason why she is engaged to Bayard all the time and does not tell Miss Jenny, but she does not give up the chance of being a Sartoris woman and she has been trying hard to do like a Sartoris woman.

To be a Sartoris woman means to be noble, resolute, reserved, and aloof and to repress sexuality. Miss Jenny is a good example. She is born a Sartoris woman and inherits these dignified qualities naturally, but Narcissa is a common young woman and she has the common physical desire, so it is difficult for her to learn to be a Sartoris woman. That is a dilemma for her: she is crazy for being accepted as a Sartoris woman but she cannot bear the torment which is caused by the repression of sexuality. In addition, Bayard is far away from her, which makes her more lonely and painful. These anonymous and obscene love letters just come at this time when her heart is in need of comfort. They lessen her inner loneliness and emptiness. These obscene words also seemingly satisfy her vanity as a woman, and confirm her existence and identity as a desirable and physical woman. That is an unmentionable secret. Shortly before Bayard comes back, she decides to show one of letters to Miss Jenny, because they will get married and she will become a Sartoris member legally. She is thirsty for the recognition of the position, so she needs to know how a Sartoris lady handles it. However, Miss Jenny says that "no lady would permit herself to receive anybody anonymous love letters, no

matter how badly she wanted to" (Faulkner, 1977, p.739) and she tells her to give it to Colonel Sartoris and let him find out who sent it and punish him, but Narcissa refuses. She does not agree with what Miss Jenny says—"I'd rather have the whole world know that somebody thought that way about her once and got horsewhipped than to have him keep on thinking that way about her unpunished" (Faulkner, 1977, p.736). She says she cannot let any man know that anybody thinks such things about her. She would rather burn it. That is the difference of a Sartoris woman and a common woman. She tries to use a different way to protect her reputation meanwhile she gives herself a gleam of chance to get back to be a common woman with sexual desire. She lies and keeps all of the letters in secret and sometimes takes them out to read again and again in order to fill her inner emptiness and satisfy her sexual desire psychologically. Brooks also thinks that "from some obscure motive—perhaps the letters provide her with a vague, erotic excitement—she preserves them" (Brooks, 1982, p.15). However, after these letters are stolen, she is afraid that her secret will be revealed and she will be considered an erotic and carnal woman. This is a great threat to her status which she is endowed with by the marriage and is to some extent unaccepted by family members. She lives such a terrified life, but fortunately nothing happens. She gets over this worry gradually and decides to repress her sexuality to be a true Sartoris woman, so she refuses to remarry when Miss Jenny tells her she can. She tries hard to protect the family reputation as her own and take care of Miss Jenny and Benbow, although Miss Jenny regards her as an outsider all the time in her deep heart and Elnora is hostile to her, and even often speaks ill of her before Miss Jenny. They live their women's life quietly in the big house without men.

When the Yankee suddenly appears with those obscene letters, Narcissa is determined to induce him with her body to get them back in order to protect not only her own reputation but also the Sartoris family's. She has been accustomed to her sexless life, and all that she does is for the Sartoris' reputation and her position which are obtained at the cost of repressing her sexuality, just like what Suwabe Koichi points in "The Sartoris Women: Mapping 'There Was a Queen' in Faulkner's Career" that she has repressed her sexuality to be a Sartoris woman so much so that she does not care about using it to protect the respectability of the Sartorises. She thinks it correct and necessary to surrender her body as a sacrifice for the family's reputation as a Sartoris woman. However, she is totally wrong. After Miss Jenny learns of the whole thing, "the heart of this genteel old warrior cannot bear the stress of this last and greatest indignity to the Sartoris name, and she dies quietly sitting in her chair [...]" (Bell, 1985, p.168). The Sartorises are never submissive. It is impossible for a Sartoris woman to obtain something which can destroy her reputation at the cost of her body. The unyielding Sartorises would rather resort to violence just like what Emily Grierson did to Homer Barron. Koichi also indicates in the same paper that not only is Narcissa's action to retrieve the obscene letters extremely outrageous to the old "Southern Lady," but also Narcissa, in her own style, behaves as a Sartoris woman, which devastates the matriarch. She has been trying to be a Sartoris woman and regarding herself as a Sartoris woman, but she never can be that one. That is her tragedy.

Narcissa has protected her reputation at the cost of her body. Actually this is a ridiculous contradiction. In order to save her reputation she gives up her innocence. She is tortured by this contradiction, so after she comes back from Memphis she and her son go through the hot afternoon, down cross the pasture toward the creek. She is longing for a baptism to wash away all of the sins and impurity. She does not do this by herself, but with her son, the future patriarch of the family, which indicates that she wants to get understanding and forgiveness from the authority. Therefore, after she has purified herself she tells everything to Virginia. She thinks that she has done everything she can to hold down the tradition and reputation. After she is baptized in Jordan, she wears white, "her white dress flowing slowly, heroic, like a caryatid from a temple facade come to life" (Faulkner, 1977, p.738). The color white is a symbol of purity and innocence.

Faulkner endowed Narcissa with obedience to the tradition and morality, and on the other hand implanted rebellion in her inner heart. She is the combination of obedience and rebellion, so she is tortured all the time. Her tragedy is unavoidable.

IV. ELNORA

Elnora is a very important figure in this short story. She appears at the beginning of the story and has carried on the major part of the narration, presenting us the story happening long ago. She has witnessed the glory and decline of the Sartoris family. Strictly speaking, Elnora is not only the housemaid of the family, but also a member of the family. She is the daughter of John Sartoris and the half-sister of old Bayard. Virginia is actually her aunt. Elnora's mother is probably a housemaid of Sartoris family, and she was occupied by John Sartoris and gave birth to Elnora. However, this special relationship does not make her as noble as a Sartoris woman, and she is a housemaid all the time, taking care of all chores of Sartoris family. Her hands never stop even when she is talking. This is a common phenomenon. Negro has no freedom and they belong to white people. In Old South, men can have affairs with Negro, because men are the owner and they can control everything, but women are forbidden. Women's virginity is valued more than their life. Therefore, to some degree, Elnora is a proud Negro, because she has a part of blood relationship with Sartoris family. This is also one reason why she is always looking down upon Narcissa and speaking badly of her.

Elnora is extremely loyal to Sartoris family and respects Virginia very much, who symbolizes the social tradition and order. "When she spoke of the two women she used "she" indiscriminately, putting the least inflection on the one which referred to Miss Jenny" (Faulkner, 1977, p.732). When she narrates the whole story of Miss Jenny coming all the way

to Mississippi by herself, she is full of admiration and worship. "Because it's a Sartoris job. Cunnel knowed that when he died and tole me to take care of her. Tole me. Not no outsiders from town" (Faulkner, 1977, p.728). The last words of John Sartoris endow Elnora with a glorious task—taking care of Virginia. John Sartoris gives the great task to her rather than outsider from town which indicates Narcissa. Therefore, in Elnora's heart she thinks of herself as a member of Sartoris family and she never recognizes Narcissa as a family member and look down upon her. She even does not want to speak out her name unless it is absolutely necessary. "It's little you done for anybody since you come out here. We never needed you. Don't you ever think it...And you needn't to come back" (Faulkner, 1977, p.729). Although she never speaks out, she just thinks it. "Trash. Town trash" (Faulkner, 1977, p.729) is her remarks of Narcissa. "I nigger and she white. But my black children got more blood than she got. More behavior" (Faulkner, 1977, p.732). Elnora refuses to accept Narcissa from her inner heart. Although she is white she has no quality at all.

Elnora is full of suspicion about Narcissa's going to Memphis and staying there for two nights, although she does not care if she comes back or not on the surface. She even asks her daughter Saddy where Miss Narcissa went, expecting Narcissa may tell Saddy the truth because Saddy has a better relationship with Narcissa than her. "Her not come back? When she worked for five years to get herself married to Bayard? Working on Miss Jenny all the time Bayard was off to that war? I watched her. Coming out here two or three times a week, with Miss Jenny thinking she was just coming out to visit like quality. But I knowed. I knowed what she was up to all the time .Because I knows trash. I knows the way trash goes about working in with quality." (Faulkner, 1977, p.734). Elnora, from the beginning, has the suspicion that Narcissa tries her best to please Miss Jenny in order to get married to Bayard, and she can get wealth, status and honor. She is sure that Narcissa will never give up what she has made every effort to gain, so when Saddy says Narcissa may get married, Elnora utters her opposition immediately. "Her marry? What for? Give up what she got here? That ain't what it is" (Faulkner, 1977, p. 734). To some degree, this also shows Elnora's loyalty to Sartoris family. She lives to defend everything for this great family from beginning to end, not allowing any harm to this family.

Elnora is the first person to find Miss Jenny is dead. It seems that she has a kind of presentiment. "She stopped, invisible, soundless, her eyes suddenly quite luminous in her almost-vanished face" (Faulkner, 1977, p. 744). Then she found Miss Jenny had died. Although Miss Jenny lives in her wheel, she is still the backbone of the family. Her death is a heavy strike to the family. "She stood in the doorway, tall, not touching the jamb on either side. Her face was blank; she did not appear to be looking at, speaking to, any one" (Faulkner, 1977, p. 744). She is startled to silence. At last her "soft, cold, peremptory" (Faulkner, 1977, p. 744) voice indicates that she has taken herself as the new supervisor and defender of the family. She is also the tradition defender, although she belongs to the lower social status in this society.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Virginia, Narcissa and Elnora, all of these three women are sentimentally attached to the tradition of Old South, which becomes deeply ingrained in their inner heart, and at the same time they all accept it, and try their best to defend it, even at the cost of their precious youth, freedom and inherent natural desire. Virginia is a sheer defender and even considered as the tradition and authority, and at the end of her life she realizes women's helplessness. Narcissa strives for the recognition of Sartoris family and does not hesitate to retrieve her reputation by selling out her body. Elnora takes herself as the defender of the family and devotes herself to the family chores wholeheartedly and without complaint. However, Narcissa is the combination of obedience and rebellion. She keeps a small part of emotion and sexual desire in her inner heart. But when her reputation and the family's reputation are threatened, she chooses to save reputation resolutely. These three women are brave to take on responsibility, so they are worthy of respect, and at the same time their fate is destined to be a tragedy, so they are worthy of sympathy.

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