

Analysis of *A Rose for Emily* From the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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Trauma theory has recently become a research hotspot in the academic circle. It not only takes root in the field of psychology but deepens its influence in other humanities and social sciences, such as literature, sociology, history, anthropology, etc., providing a richer theoretical perspective for interdisciplinary research. In this paper, based on the theory of trauma, the author conducted an analysis on *A Rose for Emily* from Faulkner—who tacitly expressed his reverence to the southern homeland through depictions of characters, with the emphasis on the protagonist who suffered a series of social, family changes exacerbating the trauma symptoms, and presents different degrees of restoration and stray phenomenon, so as to interpret the protagonist’s choice of life and tragic fate.

Keywords: trauma theory, *A Rose for Emily*, Emily

Introduction of Trauma Theory

Cathy Caruth, professor of humanities at Cornell university, wrote *The Silent Experience: Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) in which she defines Trauma as “an inescapable experience of sudden, catastrophic events. Reactions to the event are often delayed, uncontrolled, and involve repeated hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 15). Judith Herman wrote in her famous psycho-medical book *Trauma And Recovery* (2015) that “the pain of psychological trauma stems from the feeling of powerlessness. At the time of the trauma, the victim feels helpless under overwhelming force” (Herman, 2015, p. 29). Once the victims have indelible traumatic memories, they can’t help falling into mental trauma, destroying the benign connection between normal life and society. The paradoxical reaction of their yearning for and rejection of daily communication between people has gradually become an indestructible psychological torture. “Traumatic events destroy the sense of security that allows people to live a normal life. People and events in the world are no longer in their control, and no longer relevant or rational” (Herman, 2015, p. 29). Trauma patients often close their hearts and refuse external help. Over time, they will be out of touch with society, closed and even forced to degenerate, losing the necessary ability to think. Many patients experience the conflicting responses of memory intrusion and confinement withdrawal, and the conflict between these two opposing psychological states is perhaps the most defining feature of PTSD (Herman, 2015, p. 29). Memory intrusion makes trauma patients reexperience traumatic events in their minds from time to time, just like touching a switch, and the traumatic

memories are fragmented in the way of flashbacks. Under the pain memories of harassing, pioneering experiences severely hamper people's normal development, so it is difficult to get back to the original normal life. Likewise, confinement withdrawal renders patients numb or distort their ability of senses, and even makes them lose the sense of time. In this paper, based on trauma theory, phenomenon of trauma and recovery process of the protagonist will be analyzed to better interpret the underlying causes of Emily's tragedy.

The Briefing on the Story

William Faulkner, winner of Nobel Prize for Literature, is a representative of stream-of-consciousness literature and one of the most influential writers in southern American literature as well. In the 1920s, the United States experienced the baptism of world war I and the civil war, and collision of the traditional southern plantation economy and the advanced northern industrial revolution triggered a large number of southern literature writers to imperiously express their reverence for traditional southern civilization and traditional moral codes. After World War I, the rise of industrial revolution in the north and the abundant funds accumulated in the war inspired people's aspirations for freedom and equality, which hit the southern plantation economy badly. The contradiction between the two economic systems catalyzed a series of social problems. The defeat of the South undoubtedly damaged the class interests of the traditional aristocrats who pursued black slavery. As a conspicuous symbol of southern writers, Faulkner reproduced southern traditional culture throughout his famous short story *A Rose for Emily*. When villagers complained about the stench from Miss Emily's house, for instance, Judge Stevens said, "will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?" (Faulkner, 2013). The town's subconscious respect for Miss Emily, as well as exemption from all the taxes she was obliged to pay guaranteed by the previous generation deeply reflected the dying preservation of the old tradition people strove to remain. Even though Emily's entire aristocratic family has fallen, the traditional southern values have deeply been ingrained in the hearts of everyone in the town. They automatically took Emily as the symbol of old convention. When Miss Emily died, almost every citizen in town came to the funeral, and they thought as long as Emily lived, their feelings to southern tradition still could remain.

When Emily's patriarchy father died, a foreman Yankee named Homer Barron came to this town and was shown in the yellow-wheeled buggy in pairs with Emily. Soon there was a debated topic in the town that clung to noblesse oblige—those people in the town took Emily's behaviors as a humiliation for the nobility. The noble, nevertheless, neglected what others thought of her and determined to keep a relationship with Homer, which was a huge contrast to her former behaviors. Emily's life destiny was firmly controlled by her father before his death. Moreover, the strict order of aristocrats and the recognition of female identity make Emily accustomed to being manipulated. Emily's father cruelly deprived her of reasonable rights as a woman, no matter in daily life or in the criteria of choosing a mate, as such, she had been living in the shadow of the patriarchy aristocracy since her childhood. In the text, we can see the scene where Emily stands behind her father's tall figure who resolutely drives away every young man who comes to show his love strongly depicting his domineering and arbitrary, and on the other hand, it also implies Emily's obedience and weakness. Likewise, in the scene of Emily and her father, the dialogues between the two are never depicted. To some extent, the lack of language reflects the lack of female discourse leading from excessive control of patriarchy, which further caused Emily's psychological trauma in adulthood with traditional moral order at that time. For Emily, her father's death greatly changed her way of life

and also brought a lot of new challenges to her. She lost the aristocratic title and became normal like everyone else in the town, and only the mansion with the style of the former aristocrat maintained the noble pride of the affluent. Until Homer came—"At first we were glad in town because Miss Emily was interested in new things, but all the women said: 'A Grierson would never go after a Yankee, a jogger'. 'But there are others, the older generation, who think that a woman of true family should not forget her high rank, even at the risk of losing her father'" (Faulkner, 2013). It could be seen that as the embodiment of tradition, Emily's words and actions represented the rules and regulations of the old order, so when Emily was seen traveling with Yankee Homer, people took a ridiculous backlash and gossiped a lot.

But Emily, however, neglected those rumors totally. This "degenerate and condescending" yearning for the innocence of free love is a brave step out of her past trauma. The vulnerable patients rebuild their connection to the world by connecting with others" (Herman, 2015, p. 47). This connection is undoubtedly benign for Emily at this time. She walked out of the mansion and showed up in a carriage with her beloved without any hesitation. But when she found out Homer did not manage to marry her, Emily turned to poison Homer in the end resolutely, which was also a heartrending struggle against her miserable life. After that, her door was closed, and no one in the town saw her in or out, only the Negro male servant took care of her basic living needs. The collapse of her love further exacerbated Emily's psychological trauma and the complete closure and severance of external relationships are typical features of PTSD, but she also experienced a brief awakening of self-awareness in that course. For about six or seven years, her door was open for art classes such as porcelain painting to children in town, which can be called as a rehabilitation process for Emily, where she actively begins to form bonds with others actively. Unfortunately, it just didn't last long enough to offset the influence of her father and Homer.

"The victim may appear to have returned to a normal lifestyle. But what doesn't change is that everyday things seem to lose their original meaning and the sense of reality is constantly distorted" (Herman, 2015, p. 44). The grey hair left in the bed artfully depicted her lasting but pathological love to Homer, and this symbol revealed the ending of the story that Emily poisoned Homer and slept with his body in the bed people found for over 40 years and thus leaving an indentation of head and the embrace posture. Besides that, Emily is strongly infected by the traumatic memory evidenced by wearing a thin gold chain all the time. She extremely put the emphasis on the change of time apparently, which was also another evidence to show her perplexity and strong rejection of the ever-changing surroundings, and she did not want time to run away desperately as well. It also described that when the new generation became the leaders of the town, Emily refused to let the post office nail metal number and email on her door, and even when the government's people went to the home of Emily to ask her to pay taxes, her psychological compulsion also showed the inner desire to return to the past and refusal to the new change. Emily's numbness to the past life and her resistance to the new life and changing environment exacerbated her traumatic symptoms. Gradually she stopped talking and the aphasia phenomenon is the dominating external manifestation in the course of the drastic exclusion from the outside world and the time.

Emily's Recovery from Trauma

Establishing a safe environment is the key process for trauma patients to rebuild their sense of security during recovery (Herman, 2015, p. 151). For Emily, the influence of chaos, destruction and death deepened the crisis of faith. In the process of self-rescue and recovery, she sought for spiritual refuge in a sense. It can be easily

found that Emily's residence is full of symbolic significance, representing not only the former grandeur of the southern aristocracy but the people's yearning and remembrance of the old tradition. Emily sequestered her inner spirituality in this house, and she repeatedly closed the door to defend her own lasting noble past. In the early years, Emily rebuilt her trust with the society by building connection with others and developed positive relationships that were instrumental in her recovery from trauma. The house, however, has imprisoned Emily with her sorrow memories and strong clinging to the past, because it is evidently a symbol of order and nobility of southern tradition which brought the sense of security, moreover, it cut off the connection between Emily and the outside world leading to her failure to take ownership and the awakening of self-awareness. The author revealed Emily's weak resistance to her tragic destiny through the long, tough recovery path in the final dramatic scene. And the iron grey hair left in the bed was the best proof of the failure of the recovery. Her reluctance to get out made the house not only her spiritual fortress blockading connection but her prison against the reality.

For trauma patients, the first principle of recovery is to regain their autonomy. In the process of self-reconstruction, she must be the sole ruler and arbiter (Herman, 2015, p. 124). Emily gained autonomy in her life after her father died. We can see her efforts in the process of recovery—to open herself, put aside the shackles of family, and embrace free love; connecting with society actively and offering art classes to children in town. All of these attempts showed her emergence of self-consciousness and the resumption of women's discourse power and reflected Emily's courage and determination to recover from the struggle and the chance to embrace a new life. The success of Emily's recovery might not be successful comprehensively, but the author believes she had some remarkable breakthroughs indeed given the background of the times and the limitations of female roles at that time. The recovery process has a long way to go because of years of traumatic experiences so it's fair to say that Emily is showing signs of recovery in that course. The cruel treatment of Homer, for instance, is a stark contrast to Emily's previous weak character which proves her awakening of self-consciousness and the establishment of female independent personality. Although her deeds were relentless and pathological, Emily grasped the autonomy of fate manifesting the struggle before despair and the weak revolt against fate. Moreover, as a woman in the old society, Emily was also faced with the traditional female ethics during the recovery process. Under the shackles of countless ethical morals, she did not hesitate to shrink from the advice of the town and her relatives. She went to the town to buy supplies for Homer and must have been ready to start a new life. Her bravery actions were embodiment of her self-reconstruction, but the sad thing is this kind of rebirth was feeble.

Conclusion

Nobel Laureate Sinclair Lewis referred to Faulkner in her speech, saying he had "liberated the South from the tears of sentimental women". Faulkner's superb stream of consciousness expression and superb narrative skills force readers' attention on Miss Emily herself which can not only reflect the appearance of southern aristocrats in the past but help reader feel the contradictions and conflicts peculiar to the changing times from the external social connections. The author does not intend to portray Emily as a victim of the war and the time, but to show the beauty and loss of southern tradition through her brave struggle and her undaunted and proud attitude just like the firm rose, noble and bright. Even if time has taken away the greatness of the past, the spirit and culture of the south will remain forever deeply rooted in people's hearts. Although the slavery, racism and other social problems exposed in southern plantations were fiercely criticized, Faulkner takes a responsibility to speak

for those who are raised in the southern culture to voice their sorrow and solemnity to lost people and time, which explains why he gave the standing dignity to Emily.

Trauma may be a topic that every one of us cannot escape in our life. From the perspective of trauma recovery, self-rescue awareness is also necessary in the case of isolation and helplessness. Finding a safe mental environment and mastering the autonomy of life are the key steps to escape from trauma. As marginalized figures in the old society, women can still try to control their own destiny and bravely fight for their happiness. The actively self-rescue of psychological trauma patients, as well as external support and the necessity of social help are highly required in the recovery process, providing them with more chances to heal from trauma and help them pursue brand-new life as soon as possible.

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