

An Analysis of Emily's Image in *The Easter Parade*— Awakening and Dilemma

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The Easter Parade is a masterpiece by Richard Yates, which was published in 1976. The image of Emily, the heroine of the book, can be regarded as an iconic figure of early feminists in America. The aim of this paper is to explore Richard Yates' view of feminism, through analyzing the image of Emily in the book, and to understand the pursuits and dilemmas of feminists. Emily, as a woman in patriarchal society, who has always struggled independently on her own and fights against her fate, ends up in failure. Sarah, a typical image of "the other" who is dependent on men, eventually dies a tragic death. In front of the cruel and unpredictable fate, whether women have the sense of resistance or not, it seems that life always points to tragedy. Emily's path of awakening is accompanied by real-life dilemmas, which is the epitome of every feminist's experience.

Keywords: *The Easter Parade*, Emily, Richard Yates, feminism

Introduction

It was in the last decade of 20th century that Richard Yates' *The Easter Parade* was introduced to China. Until the present, Chinese readers are not very familiar with this novel though it is one of Richard Yates' most influential works. In fact, there is still a lack of research on this work at home and abroad. Few papers related to this works can be found in domestic academia, and no special studies can be obtained on *The Easter Parade* in foreign academia. Scholars tend to put several works of Yates together and study them as a whole. However, this work deserves more attention. As the protagonist of this book, Emily's life experience is portrayed in a very detailed way, and all the descriptions about Emily indicate that she is a typical feminist. Sarah, in sharp contrast, is a typical image of "the perfect housewife". Obviously, the writer's progressive idea and feminist thought are embodied in Emily's image, which has considerable implications for today's affirmative action. The above factors give meaning and necessity to the discussion in this paper. Richard Yates' view of feminism is revealed through the analysis of Emily's path of awakening and pursuing. A comparison between Emily's image and that of her sister Sarah and her mother Esther is also done to present Yates' feminist ideas. Based on a comprehensive analysis, the readers will have a deeper understanding of the pursuits and dilemmas of American feminists.

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Analysis of Emily's Image

The Awakening of Self-Awareness

Taken as a whole, Emily's awakening of self-awareness is inseparable from her growth process. Emily grows up with the absence of her father, and it is mainly her mother, Esther, who homeschools Emily and her older sister, Sarah. Unfortunately, her mother is a vain and shallow woman. Esther moves frequently just to fawn on those wealthy and aristocratic people. Although she can barely afford to pay the rent for a mansion, she makes every effort to live in a "relatively nice" neighborhood anyway. Emily's mother receives little education and has no professional accomplishments. Dreaming of becoming a socialite and pleasing different gentlemen are all of Esther's ambitions. Esther raises her daughters with a focus on superficial things, and her main concern is that whether her two daughters can become so-called "ladies". She pays close attention to her daughters' behaviors and does not let them do anything that would ruin their manners. She asks Sarah to do volunteer works, but her real intention is that let Sarah take the chance to meet some "promising young people" (Yates, 2008). In addition, Esther deceives Sarah and Emily about their father's university diploma. The truth is that Emily and Sarah's father only attends one year of college.

However, Emily's values are diametrically opposed to her mother's. When Esther flirts with other men and behaves in a contrived manner in an attempt to please those men, Emily always feels disgusted. Emily says she could not imagine that Esther could be a mother, but she is under her mother's control. When Esther asks Emily to remarry and becomes a housewife, Emily firmly refuses. It becomes clear to Emily that her mother's upbringing simply does not suit her and that there is no possibility of changing her mother's values. Therefore, after becoming financially independent, Emily quickly leaves her family of origin and chooses her own path in life, making all major life decisions on her own. Emily does not allow her mother to interfere in her private affairs at all. When Emily gets married, she even does not tell Esther about the wedding in advance or invite her to the wedding. It is after the wedding that Emily informs her mother of the marriage.

They were married soon after her graduation, in a civil ceremony at the Municipal Building... They told their mothers first. Pookie wept into the telephone, as Emily had known she would, and made them promise to come and visit her the next night. (Yates, 2008, p. 60)

She ignores all advice of Esther about love and marriage. Once, Emily goes to visit Esther, it has been several years after Emily gets divorced with her ex-husband. Esther suggests that Emily should marry again: "Well, all the more reason, then. It's just that I do feel it's time for you to, oh, I won't say 'settle down'; Lord knows I never settled down; I just mean, get married again. Have children" (p. 69). Emily just gives no response to Esther's suggestion, and Esther immediately knows that it's Emily's way of expressing refusal. Then, Esther says: "It's none of my business" (p. 69). In stark contrast to Emily is her sister Sarah, who is portrayed more like a partial inheritance and continuation of Esther. Sarah's thirst for male affection is evident in her junior high school years. She even says "damn" and "I could kill you" to Emily just because she does not allow her to go out with a young man she has a crush on (p. 22). Sarah is always in love with different men and looking for dependence.

The Independent Pursuing of the Ideal of Life

Emily shows her gifts and talents at a young age. She is the first college student in her family and is awarded

a full scholarship before she even starts college. She appears to be very determined when she chooses English as her major and cherishes the educational opportunity a lot. When Emily is a freshman, she has already found her ambition in life: to become a true intellectual. Emily believes that being an intellectual is a goal worth striving for, not being a "lady". Emily continues to explore her field of interest and eventually finds out that journalism is her favorite. She works as a journalist, librarian, and advertising copywriter in order to achieve her ambition. Although Emily eventually loses her career, she has tried her best to explore her potential and the value of her life.

It is evident that Emily's spirit of exploration and sense of autonomy fit well with the propositions of the second wave of American feminism. Women should not waste their talents and possibilities by trapping themselves in domestic chores and subjecting themselves to the traditional stereotype of the "good woman. Sarah is a typical example of "the perfect housewife" suggested by Friedan (2010). The story background of *The Easter Parade* is set in the United States between the 1930s and 1970s, a period when American society was still a typically patriarchal society despite the second wave of the feminist movement. Especially after World War II, more American women returned to their families and men took over most of the work. The image of women promoted by the media at that time could be summarized as the perfect housewife and the loving mother. Sarah gets married and becomes a housewife at the age of 20. She has three sons within three years, and her family becomes the only topic when she writes to Emily. She would write about the health condition of her sons or complain about heavy housework. Sarah has to depend on her husband and gradually becomes a male's subordinate because she has no independent source of income (Beauvoir, 2010).

The Autonomy of Love and Marriage

Emily has a unique perspective on love. For her, men are not the kind that she can rely on, nor are they equal to the center of life. Emily values men's talents and knowledge. She once falls in love with a poor seaman only because of his intelligence. She eventually decides to marry her ex-husband because he is the most knowledgeable man she knows. Emily's decisiveness in her relationships is also evident in the book. She has many lovers in her life, and each time when a relationship goes badly, Emily does not hesitate a moment to leave. When her ex-husband becomes neurotic and says something that really hurts her, she gets divorced immediately. Her sister Sarah, quite the opposite, suffers from domestic violence for 20 years and never thinks to divorce. For Emily, freedom and dignity weigh much more than a soulless marriage. She has abortions twice and even tries to publish an article to share her attitude about abortion. At the same time, Emily is a strong supporter for equality between men and women in marriage. When she learns that Sarah has suffered domestic violence from her husband for a long time, she is furious and violently denounces Tony's behavior. Emily believes that a woman is fully entitled to leave a bad spouse, which is also very different from Sarah's view of marriage. Sarah believes that marriage is sacred and cannot be destroyed. Emily once brings her lover Jack to meet Sarah and Tony. Jack makes a good impression on Sarah. Sarah then encourages Emily to marry Jack right away. When Emily hears Sarah's suggestion, she becomes very doubtful and says, "What do you mean, 'marry' him? You're always telling me to 'marry' people, Sarah. You say that about every man I bring out here. Is marriage supposed to be the answer to everything?" (Yates, 2008, p. 74) Sarah has already been brainwashed by the concept of being the perfect housewife, so she answers without a second thought, "It's an answer to an awful lot of things" (p. 74).

In addition, Emily believes that it is not a woman's duty to have children. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (2010) asks a question: What is a woman? Beauvoir identifies women as "the other". The word "human" is used only to refer to men. As for women, they are the complement of men. They must be dependent on men. Without men, women cannot live independently. Man is the reference used to distinguish woman from man, while woman cannot be the reference to distinguish man from woman. Men are the "subject", while women are "the other". Unlike her sister Sarah's conformity to the identity of "the other", Emily's spirit of resistance and sense of autonomy in her romantic relationship and marriage are undoubtedly a challenge or revolution to the identity of "the other".

Tragic Fate and Realistic Dilemma

Emily is an early feminist who has been fighting her fate consistently. However, Emily ends up alone and her financial condition is very bad. Being in a very difficult situation, she has to seek help from her nephew. At the end of the story, Emily murmurs, "I'm almost fifty years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life" (Yates, 2008, p. 75).

Emily is a hard-working and talented student during her college years. However, she does not receive enough recognition and praise for her efforts and talents. For Emily's mother, the point of pursuing higher education is to become a more attractive woman. Grimes believes that Emily's efforts should be spent on finding a better spouse. Much of the reason for Emily's union with her ex-husband stems from his recognition and appreciation for Emily's talents, which later turns out to be a despicable lie on his part. Her ex-husband never really appreciates her hard work and intelligence, nor does he ever notice Emily's dreams and ambitions.

When Emily works as a copywriter, her boss speaks highly of her. Her boss's appreciation of Emily's writing skills gives her a great boost. However, when Emily deems that she is finally recognized by the society, she finds out that her boss's appreciation is just a false feeling. The boss only regards Emily as a money-making tool, and when she finds a younger employee, she begins to find fault with everything Emily has done and forces her to leave the company. Emily finally resigns voluntarily to protect her dignity. After losing her job, Emily has to live on welfare and never finds any work after that.

Walter does not take on the responsibility of being a father either. Due to his divorce, Walter is absent for much of Emily's formative years, and Walter clearly shows more favoritism toward Sarah. Walter always appears to be indifferent to Emily's achievements or emotional needs. When Emily tells him that she has won a full scholarship, Walter just gives her a perfunctory compliment and immediately changes the subject to Sarah, expressing great regret that Sarah could not attend college. When Emily and Sarah have buck teeth at the same time, he chooses to treat Sarah rather than Emily and keeps it hidden from Emily. When Emily finally learns the truth from Sarah about the dental visit, she is 36 years old, already a grown-up adult. However, she couldn't help but feel disappointed and jealous. When Walter dies, Sarah immediately cries. But even when Emily sees her father's body, she is not able to shed a single tear.

Emily has many lovers in her life, but none of these men who appears in Emily's life really respects women. As a partner, none of them possesses the sense of responsibility and empathy. The male characters in *The Easter Parade* are invariably selfish and ruthless. They are generally portrayed as pale and boring.

Emily's eventual collapse and downfall are inextricably linked to the prejudices and blows of a patriarchal

society, the absence of father, her career failures, and her emotional disappointments.

Conclusions

Emily's life is a life of awakening and struggle, and a life of being entangled in the predicaments of the real world. The struggle of the protagonist and the somber tone of the work reveal Yates' deep sympathy for women who fight against their fate. Yates portrays Emily as a highly rebellious and pioneering female character, and it can be said that Emily is a typical representative of American feminists in the mid-to-late twentieth century. *The Easter Parade* is set during the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States. The core claims of the movement are the elimination of all kinds of gender discrimination, the elimination of old stereotypical images of women, the legalization of abortion, and the protection of divorced and widowed women. The concepts Emily presents in this work coincide with the demands of the movement: She denies her sister Sarah's reverence for love and marriage; she disdains her mother's flattering attitude toward men; she reveres knowledge and has pursuit of career; she is decisive and autonomous in romantic relationships; she supports abortion; she is brave enough to leave a failed marriage. From Emily's life experience, we can understand the pursuits of self-conscious feminists. They are brave enough to fight, brave enough to pursue, and brave enough to explore more possibilities in life. Sarah is a typical representative of "the perfect housewife" in a patriarchal society, who dies tragically in the end. She is trapped in her marriage and family all through her life. The whole meaning of her life comes from her family. Due to her long dependence on her husband, Sarah gradually loses her sense of self-seeking and struggle. From the time Sarah enters the family and marriage, she is destined to become "the other". If Sarah's tragic ending is predestined, Emily's sad ending is Yates' way of making clear to readers the powerlessness of man before his impermanent fate. This "inescapable loneliness" is the subject of all Yates' works. Although Emily has tried her best to fight against her fate and pursue her dreams, she still cannot escape from this sad end. The oppression of the patriarchal society, the absence of father, the failure of her career, and the disappointment of her relationship are all thorns in the path of Emily's growth, which always convey the cruelty of fate to the readers.

Richard Yates portrays Emily through the technique of comparison. By contrasting Emily's image with that of Sarah and Esther, Emily's image is made more distinct and vivid. Comparison makes Emily's feature of being a "new woman" more convincing. In addition, the contrast between life experiences of Emily and other female characters in this work also makes the whole work more realistic and thought-provoking.

In Yates' writing, whether a woman has the spirit of struggle and whether she actively fights against fate or not, it seems that the ending is always bleak. Emily is a "lonely fighter", despite her powerlessness in front of the cruel fate, which is a bigger theme that no one can avoid; she still marches on, even if the road ahead is long, even if she struggles and sinks. Just like every feminist who still struggles in the patriarchal society, although the road is full of thorns, they still march on, and they are always on the road.

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