

The Emotional Tragedy of the Southern Belle Myth in *A Rose for Emily* and *Dry September*

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William Faulkner is known for his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, where he created a series of tragic novels featuring female characters. Faulkner's two representative short stories, *A Rose for Emily* and *Dry September*, portray the tragic destinies of Emily and Minnie who were oppressed by the southern belle myth and reduced to self-destruction. This paper is for the purpose of analyzing the causes of the emotional tragedy of Emily and Minnie through the comparison between these two stories.

Keywords: William Faulkner, southern belle myth, emotional tragedy, *A Rose for Emily*, *Dry September*

Introduction

William Faulkner's works primarily revolve around the themes of racial discrimination, the southern belle myth, and the collapse of Southern traditional values after the Civil War. Female characters in his works often exhibit contradictory traits, struggling between societal expectations, family relationships, and personal aspirations. Meanwhile, they also embody the intertwining of love and hatred, submission and rebellion, hope and despair. Faulkner deeply explores not only the emotional needs of women, but also the evolution of their roles in a patriarchal society. And he keenly perceives female tragedies particularly in south America, where women were oppressed by the southern belle myth and patriarchal culture.

In Faulkner's stories *A Rose for Emily* and *Dry September*, the female protagonists, Emily and Minnie, have been the focal points of scholarly discussions. However, this paper aims to analyze and compare the root causes for their tragedy through the lens of the southern belle myth and the conflicts between individual and society. The analysis will help uncover the harms inflicted upon women by the society during that era.

The Causes of Emotional Tragedy

The Cause of the Southern Belle Myth

As a cultural product of a specific period in southern American, the southern belle myth serves as a shackle imposed upon women's personalities and desires. It is one of the root causes of the emotional tragedy of Emily and Minnie. Starting from the 17th century, the plantation economy was gradually formed in south America, symbolizing the establishment of white men's dominant position and the emergence of the southern belle myth. "In the context of the history of the southern America, a belle is not someone who is more attractive than other women, but a white woman whose identity and social role are based on her privileged status" (Pang, 2006, p. 58).

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Anne Goodwyn Jones once defined the image of the southern “belle” as follows:

A belle is a privileged white girl on the verge of womanhood but not yet married, a radiant, exciting time. She is fragile, innocent, and sexually ignorant. She is a form of popular art, delighting audiences but never challenging them. Instead, she attracts them—the more gentlemen who visit, the better—ultimately allowing herself to be chosen as a wife. (Ping, 2010)

White women in the South were revered as “pure, chaste saints” and were expected to exhibit qualities, such as poise, grace, and submissive attitudes. Additionally, the southern belle myth prioritized female chastity above all else. Women were required to maintain their chastity to ensure the purity of the racial bloodline. It was under this puritanical restraint that women’s minds were twisted, their normal sexual desires were repressed, self-awareness was lost, and rights to pursue freedom were deprived.

At the same time, the southern belle myth also symbolizes the cultural traditions of the southern America. “Before the Civil War, they represented the reasonable order of social norms and the honor-driven southern spirit; they became the cultural fortresses of the South, guarding the last line of defense for southern traditions” (Shi, 2014, p. 184). The concept of the southern belle myth gradually came to be defined in the minds of new southerners after the Civil War as a nostalgic myth of the past, representing the former glory and the escape from the harsh realities. Superficially, white women were regarded as goddesses. In fact, they were often relegated to subordinate positions and confined to narrow roles.

In *A Rose for Emily* and *Dry September*, the two female characters both grow up under the influence of the southern belle myth, which assigns them specific social roles and expectations. In Emily’s case, the constraints of the southern belle myth on women are particularly pronounced. As a typical southern belle, Emily comes from a noble background, has good manners, and embodies the traditional ideals of chastity and nobility. These factors make her the object of men’s pursuit in the town. However, as the advent of new industrial civilization, Emily tries to uphold her family honor and southern traditions but ends up becoming disconnected with the reality.

In *Dry September*, Minnie, in stark contrast, has a modest background and is socially active. Under the influence of the southern belle myth, Minnie gradually loses the attention of men for being the opposite of a southern belle. In her pursuit of love, the constraints from the society make her resort to extreme measures to gain attention and self-satisfaction.

As noted by Hongchun Yu, Faulkner’s female characters can be categorized as “pure victims, victimizers, and rebellious victims” (Yu, 1997, p. 66). Emily and Minnie resemble withered roses under the crimson twilight, for being the victims of the era. Then, the questions arise: What compels women to become “belles” with twisted inner selves? And what factors drive Emily and Minnie with vastly different personalities onto the same path of self-destruction, becoming both victims and perpetrators?

The Cause of the Conflict Between the Southern Tradition and New Changes

The oppression and limitations imposed by the southern belle myth prevent women from self-realization. Under the constraints, Emily and Minnie find it difficult to balance their inner desires and societal expectations, leading to the destruction of their personalities.

Furthermore, as the society evolves over time, traditional southern norms undergo significant changes. However, Emily and Minnie fail to adapt to the changes and are trapped in outdated beliefs. Faced with external challenges, Emily isolates herself from the outside world while Minnie satisfies her emotional needs through the pursuit of fame. However, the inevitable conflicts between their personal desires and societal expectations ultimately make them down the path of self-destruction.

Emily, as a typical representation of traditional southern belle from the aristocratic Grierson family, was destined to bear the burdens that came with her social status. After the Civil War, the old southern value system collapsed, and Emily's family's glory faded away. Nevertheless, her obsession with the past prevented her from accepting any change. She isolated herself from society, clung to the traditional southern civilization, and staunchly upheld the values of a bygone era. "Her house stubbornly stood amidst modern equipment and machinery; she refused to pay taxes and remembered that the late Colonel Sartoris had exempted her from them" (Faulkner, 2010). In the eyes of the townspeople, Emily symbolized the past, being a tradition, a duty and a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town. What the townspeople only cared about was whether Emily could preserve the southern traditions and evoke the nostalgia for a bygone era. "The emotional imbalance caused Emily to lose herself, ultimately leading to the mental breakdown of the southern belle" (Xiang, 2018, p. 189).

Under the influence of the patriarchal culture, Emily was deprived of the rights to be loved from a young age due to her domineering father's interference. After her father's death, Emily finally fell in love with Homer, a northern laborer. However, this socially unacceptable love angered the townspeople, and her marriage was sabotaged by the townspeople and her two cousins. Faced with people's interference, Emily compromised and preserved her southern belle identity and the glory of the southern aristocracy by fulfilling her "noblesse oblige". After learning that Homer had no intention of marrying her, she poisoned him and chose to be with him forever. Thus, Emily's lonely soul turned into a desert.

However, what was truly tragic was that Emily's sacrifice did not earn her a genuine care. It was only after her death that the townspeople attended her funeral with a sense of duty. "The men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house" (Faulkner, 2010). While killing her lover, Emily also killed her own desires. After she was dead, she truly became a cold, fallen monument to the southern tradition and a victim of the time which satisfied the townspeople's romanticized imagination of the past glory of the past (Xiang, 2018, p. 189).

The southern belle myth is more fully represented in the novel *Dry September*. The novel tells the story of a murder that occurs in Jefferson. Through a bloodshed triggered by rumors, Faulkner not only reveals the consequences of racial discrimination and condemns human indifference, but also criticizes the imprisonment of women by the southern belle myth and patriarchy. The story not only portrays the tragedy of the innocent black man, Will Mayes, who is unjustly killed because of the rumor, but also the emotional tragedy of Minnie Cooper, the rumor instigator.

The southern belle myth marks the beginning of Minnie's emotional tragedy. The narrative is set in the southern America after World War I, when notions of hierarchy and the southern belle myth became deeply ingrained in people's minds. Minnie was enthusiastic about socializing which made her a prominent figure in the town. "Her slender, graceful figure radiated vitality, and her overly exuberant demeanor once earned her the throne of social life in the town", as described in the story (Zhang, 2004, p. 37).

However, Minnie's lively and flirtatious behavior starkly contrasted with the dignified image expected of a southern belle, so she gradually lost the attention of men. Afterward, Minnie was ensnared in the quagmire of vanity and resorted to seductive attire to capture the gaze of men, only to become the subject of ridicule among the townsfolk.

What further pushed Minnie towards madness was the abandonment by the bank clerk and the scornful mockery from her female companions. The rejection by society made her to the point of sacrificing her own reputation. However, such attention could only provide her with fleeting psychological satisfaction. The profound

damage to her, coupled with the insincere concern of others, drove Minnie to madness and inevitably become a victim of the southern belle myth.

The Cause of Emotional Void

In addition to the southern belle myth, the emotional void and the oppression of patriarchy also contribute to the emotional tragedy of Emily and Minnie. In the context of the time, “Women’s gender and emotions were castrated... their biological gender was buried or ignored” (Feng, 2003, p. 224). Due to the collapse of traditional southern values, interpersonal coldness, and constraints within the society, Emily and Minnie found themselves in states of emotional emptiness and isolation. On one hand, Emily could hardly embrace genuine love under the morbid control of her father and the townspeople. Minnie, on the other hand, was abandoned and even ridiculed in her pursuit of love. As a result, their desires for love gradually transformed into despair, driving them to adopt extreme measures to fulfill their needs.

Love from family, friends, and partners are fundamental psychological need that has profound effects on people’s relationship formation and emotional equilibrium. When individuals feel lonely, they struggle to effectively cope with challenges and pressures. Thus, the absence of emotional fulfillment plays a significant role in people’s mental distortions.

The absence of maternal love is one of the roots of Emily’s emotional tragedy. In the story, Emily’s mother never appears and her father exercises strict control over her, driving away all the suitors who came to court her.

Miss Emily stood behind her father, slender and dressed in white. Her father’s silhouette, legs spread apart, was in front of her. He had his back to Miss Emily, holding a horsewhip, and the half-closed door framed both of their figures perfectly. (Faulkner, 2010)

Consequently, the abnormal upbringing leads to Emily’s emotional numbness, rejection of romantic love, and isolation from a young age.

In contrast to Emily’s strict upbringing under her father’s authority, Minnie lacked proper guidance and was deeply involved in social activities. She lived with her chronically ill mother and her aunt. Owing to a lack of a father figure, Minnie developed intense fantasies about men and a deep longing for romantic love.

In addition, the absence of friendship and societal indifference are also significant factors that lead to the emotional tragedy of both Emily and Minnie. Emily had no friends and her life was devoid of any meaningful human connections. When she insisted on being involved with Homer Barron, the women in the town commented: “Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer” (Faulkner, 2010). Some even said, “This is a disgrace for the town, setting a bad example for the young people” (Faulkner, 2010). Their malicious criticism seemed more like a retaliation against Emily’s family who had previously enjoyed privileges. After learning that Homer had no intention of marrying her, Emily heartlessly poisoned him. If she had had a friend to console her or provide an outlet for her suffering, perhaps she would not have resorted to such a cruel act and transformed from a victim to a perpetrator. Besides, the story begins with Emily’s funeral, yet no one truly cares about how tragically she passed away. The indifferent people held onto nostalgia for the past but were unable to resist the allure of the emerging industrial civilization. However, the southerners were unaware that their dream had already been abandoned by the time.

Minnie’s story follows a similar pattern, with the callous indifference of people and the hypocritical concern of her “friends” accelerating her madness. In the story, Minnie never receives emotional support or genuine

compassion from her female friends and southern “gentlemen”. After learning about Minnie’s alleged assault, instead of showing concern for her physical and emotional well-being, the townspeople interrogated her: “You got to tell them what he said, Minnie” (Faulkner, 2001). For men, the veracity of the rumor was not as important as using it as an excuse to attack a black man. As for Minnie’s female acquaintances, their so-called concern appeared to be driven more by curiosity than empathy. They took revenge on Minnie for stealing their youthful glory by spreading malicious gossip of her. Even when Minnie was in the throes of mental distress, “Their eyes shone, dark with excitement and secrecy” (Faulkner, 2001).

From the psychological perspective, unfulfilled emotional and sexual desires also evoke the mental distortions of Emily and Minnie. Anxiety is one of the most fundamental concepts in psychoanalysis and refers to “a state of fear, worry, or mental distress caused by internal or external factors” (Asmarani, 2017, p. 23). Emily’s anxiety stems from her inner conflict and guilt. She is burdened with the task of preserving southern traditions, yet she longs for her own love. By contrast, Minnie’s anxiety arises from her sexual impulses which drives her to regain men’s attention regardless of the cost.

The Cause of the Failure of Their Love

In matters of love, Emily and Minnie both experience fleeting romances. Emily’s love is thwarted by the interference of the townspeople and her relatives. Though Emily displays her resistance by poisoning her beloved one, she fails to escape from the influence of the society and becomes a victim of the time.

Minnie’s pursuit of love also faces relentless blows from those around her. For not conforming to the idealized image of a belle, Minnie loses her social status. Townspeople often describe her as the “pitiable white spinster” (Faulkner, 2001) because she is almost 40 and has not yet found a partner. “Once unable to develop their personalities independently, these women are prone to experiencing identity crises and engaging in extreme behaviors that society condemns” (Zhong & Qiu, 2013, p. 26). As a result, her rumor indirectly causes the death of the innocent black man.

It cannot be denied that both Emily and Minnie are deeply affected by the conflicts between societal values and their personal needs. The internal and external conflicts turn them into victims of the time. Besides, the absence of emotional needs from family members, friends, and lovers, combined with the emptiness stemming from unfulfilled personal desires, inflicts irreversible harm on them. A lack of emotional fulfillment leads to the distortion of their inner selves and the losses of their self-awareness, turning Emily and Minnie into perpetrators.

Conclusion

The southern belle myth and emotional void are the primary sources of Emily and Minnie’s emotional tragedy. Furthermore, their tragedy is an inevitable result of the conflict between individual and society. Faulkner raises a powerful voice against the southern belle myth and the patriarchal society by showcasing the unequal roles and suffering of these female characters. By exposing the ways in which traditional norms have alienated women both physically and mentally, Faulkner’s portrayal encourages readers to confront the harsh realities women faced in the past and make a critical examination of current societal values. These two stories not only underscore the importance of rectifying the injustices imposed on women, but also serve as a timeless reminder of the need for gender equality and social progress. Contemporary women are expected to actively pursue personal development, and break free from the shackles of some toxic stereotypes.

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