

Use of Contrast in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

Fuhua Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning 116028, China

Abstract

The present paper is a detailed analysis of Emily's character and her tragic fate through both horizontal and vertical human contrast and non-human contrast. Through analysis of these contrasts, Emily's character is more vividly revealed and her tragic fate is more easily understood.

Keywords

contrast, A Rose for Emily, character, tragic fate.

1. Introduction

In modern writer William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily", the heroine Emily's life is doomed to be a tragedy. Representing the deteriorating and decaying tradition of southern American aristocrats, Emily, almost totally alone, fights against the "younger generation" around her in town and resists the rapid changes that are occurring in the outside world. It is noteworthy that Emily's tragic fate is caused by her character and her unique character is best revealed in the light of the use of contrast technique by the author.

2. Body

2.1. Characterization through Horizontal Human Contrast

From the vivid contrasting picture "her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a whip", we can get that the father is an authority figure in the family, showing the male dominance and absolute power in the patriarchal society. Emily grows in the shadow of his father without the slightest chance of deciding her own fate. Like a bird imprisoned in the cage, Emily does not have to worry about food and clothes, but at the same time she loses the freedom and independence, which hampers the normal formation of her character. Even after her father's death, Emily's father still exerts profound influence upon her as is shown in the sentence "On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father."

There is also the vivid contrast between Emily and her lover Homer Barron. Homer Barron is portrayed as "a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face". "Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group." As a day-paid laborer from the North, Homer Barron is open-minded and filled with vitality and passion. Unlike Emily who attaches great importance to dignity and social status, he is never ashamed of his humble working-class origin. A loafer, Homer Barron may be drifting from one place to another, and he does not seem to have considered the relationship between him and Emily seriously. The break up with Emily is doomed due to his carefree attitude and temporary stay in Jefferson town. By contrast, Emily is reserved in nature, trying every means to maintain the glorious Grierson tradition of the upper class nobles that her father has passed down onto her. She is isolated from the outside world, and only connected to the town citizens through his male servant Cobe. "She talked to no one, probably not even to herself, for her voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse." She

keeps silent most of her life, with no chance to talk to anyone, let alone laugh loudly as Homer Barron often does.

William Faulkner also uses contrast technique to highlight Emily's arrogant and self-conceited character through interaction between the government officials and Emily herself. The newer generation of government officials wants Emily to pay taxes. To show their politeness, they make full preparations and do a lot of things in advance, but Emily just ignores everything. When they do have the opportunity to meet Emily in person, they rise when she enters, but Emily does not ask them to sit. The spokesman talks and talks and then comes to a stumbling halt. Emily just stands there, listening quietly without the intention to interrupt and start a quarrel. Contrast to the "stumbling" voice, Emily's voice is dry and cold. And she replied very concisely, repeating the line "I have no taxes in Jefferson." The reason is Colonel Sartoris. Here we can get the contrasting picture: on the one hand, a group of government officials crowd Emily's home, and they stand up upon catching sight of Miss Emily. The representative gives a speech, but not in a very confident manner, trembling all over. On the other, Emily is firm in her attitude, refusing to pay the tax. She puts on a serious-looking expression on her face and shows her contempt by refusing to let the government officials sit. She also keeps silent and at last bursts into the eloquent and powerful words. Again, when there is a disgusting smell from Emily's house, the town people complain to Judge Stevens. Obviously, the whole town is discussing the matter. To solve the problem, four men take action after midnight like burglars as if it were their fault, not Emily's. "As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street." In a word, Emily is motionless, while the big men take action secretly. Emily is calm and at ease, while the men are nervous and guilty. In this way, Emily's unapproachable sacred character and town people's over respect for Emily is revealed. Emily's falling in love with Homer is a sign of her rebellion against the tradition, but the vastly different characters foretell their failure to get married.

2.2. Characterization through Vertical Human Contrast

Emily's appearance has changed greatly over the years, which forms the contrast between the former beauty in her younger years and the withering looks when middle-aged and old. Emily is once described as "Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background" when she was young. After her father's death, she has her hair cut short, "making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene." She was portrayed as "a small, fat woman in black", a woman who looks "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water and of that pallid hue". Then the author gives a vivid description of her shape and hair. "Had grown fat, and her hair was turning gray, grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray 74 still vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man." The harsh reality has turned Emily from a pretty, slender young lady to a fat old woman. The white dress turns into black. The hair turned gray. That indicates the childhood innocence and happiness has gone for Emily and as an adult, she suffers a lot though she appears to be tough, indifferent, self-conceited and cold.

2.3. Characterization through Non-human Contrast

Faulkner gives a detailed description of the house Emily lives in. Like Emily, the house is really a view, standing alone among the modern buildings and facilities, clashing with everything around it. "It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But 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 cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps-an

eyesore among eyesores.” “The cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores” is a symbol of the fast-developing economy from the North, while the house is a symbol of the past tradition of the southern aristocrats. Most citizens of the town, especially those of the younger generation, have accepted or at least held no objection to the northerner’s advanced ideas and industrialization in the town. This can be shown in the coming of a construction company with riggers and mules and machinery to pave the sidewalks. The paragraph shows the vivid contrast between the intruding of the industrial North and the final struggle of the southern aristocrats to keep their past glory and tradition. More importantly, the unique house Emily lives in indicates her unique character.

Inside the house, the rooms are described by Faulkner as dim, dark, shadowy and lacking light. The whole house smells of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell. The furniture is heavy and old. The decaying scene is mixed with bright color—rose, which symbolizes Emily’s romance and rosary dream. The sharp contrast enhances the tragedy of Emily.

3. Conclusion

By horizontally contrasting Emily and her father, we can see the abnormal formation of Emily’s character during her growing up, which foreshadows her weird lifestyle in her coming adult years. And through the contrast between Emily and her boyfriend Homer, we come to understand their vastly different characters and attitudes towards life and marriage. By contrasting Emily and the government officials in both administrations, we impress ourselves by Emily’s overwhelming grace that she has to maintain as an aristocrat and her courage to fight like a Byronic hero. After vertically contrasting the ever-changing appearance of Emily, we can learn that she suffers a lot and experiences ups and downs, turning from a naïve girl to a tough lady. Through the non-human environment contrast, both outside and inside her house, we get Emily’s inner eagerness to sustain the past glory of the aristocrats and live a normal married life. By analyzing those above contrasts, we get insights into Emily’s inner world and better understand her tragic fate.

References

- [1] William Faulkner. *A Rose for Emily*. Ed. Noel Polk. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2000.
- [2] Li Weijuan. “Monument” falls—Reread “A Rose for Emily”[J]. *Masterpieces*. 2011.9(40-41).