

On the Grotesque in American Southern Gothic Fiction: A Case Study of “A Rose for Emily”

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Abstract

Taking Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily” as an example, this paper aims to explore the grotesque in American Southern Gothic Fiction in general, Faulkner’s works in particular. Compared with British and the 19th-century American [northern] Gothic literature, the southern Gothic by Faulkner and others reflects more reality and digs deeper into the humanity in the specific social environment. The grotesque in “A Rose for Emily” is fully illustrated from various aspects such as the arrangements of the setting atmosphere, characterization, the sublimation of the theme of death, the wording and the excellent writing techniques. This short story can serve as a mirror, through which people can learn about the historic changes during American Civil War. The study reconfirms that there are great impacts of the social changes and the external environment on the personal psychology and ideologies in American southern states.

Keywords

American Southern Gothic Fiction; Grotesque; Faulkner; “A Rose for Emily”.

1. Introduction

“A Rose for Emily” is perhaps the most famous short story by William Faulkner (1897-1962), who is one of the most celebrated American writers and the representative of the southern renaissance. This story discusses many dark themes, including death and resistance to change, which characterize the Old South and southern Gothic fiction and reflect the decaying of the South in the 1930s. Taking “A Rose for Emily” as an example, this paper aims to explore the grotesque in American Southern Gothic Fiction in general, Faulkner’s works in particular. Compared with British and 19th-century American Gothic literature, the southern literature of Faulkner and others reflect reality more and dig deeper into the humanity in the social environment, and the grotesque is one of its prominent features.

2. Gothic, Grotesque and American Southern Gothic Fiction

2.1. Gothic and Grotesque

The word “Gothic” is applicable to many fields of public domain and has strong vitality and extensibility. In terms of cultural origin, the word refers to the Goth, a tribe of the Germanic people. From the third century BC to the fifth century BC, the Goths invaded Rome and destroyed the Western Roman Empire. Compared with the splendid ancient Roman culture, the Goths were barbaric and uncivilized. Therefore, the word “Gothic” has meanings of “barbaric”, “dark” and so on (Liu, 2007, 32). In terms of architectural style, it refers to a medieval architectural style originated in northern France at the end of the 12th century and disliked by Renaissance thinkers. The design philosophy of Gothic architecture, being a symbol of religious and political power, was mainly used in churches and monasteries. And, the ruins of churches and monasteries left behind by the English Reformers were overshadowed with a layer of death

and mysteriously supernatural meaning (Gwynn, 2018). Although most of these buildings are still used for the religion, but “Gothic”, as an architectural style, no longer dominates world as it did at the Golden Age of Gothic revival. Compared with the Gothic architecture, the influences of Gothic literature are still profound. Numerous Gothic novels are based on a common historical imagination concerning the medieval history. Generally, their authors aim to convey emotions and create an atmosphere through these historical images. The word Gothic concerning literature can be dated back to the late 18th century. *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by English novelist Horace Walpole has been regarded as the first Gothic novel (Wang, 2009). As a medieval story that brings together elements such as mysterious prophecies, paranormal phenomena, murders, and defective personalities, this novel embodies many of the characteristics laid down in the definition of the “Gothic novel” and is committed to analyzing people’s fear and mysterious psychology. Nowadays, such Gothic elements can also be found in horror movie, rock music, and some sub-cultural groups (Gwynn, 2018).

As for “grotesque,” it is the slipperiest of aesthetic categories related to Gothic. Various people entertain different ideas concerning it. Thomas Mann states that grotesque is the most genuine style of modern art, while William Van O’Connor argues that grotesque is not only a modern phenomenon, but also a *peculiar American* one (Spiegel, 1972). Both of them consider grotesque from a broad perspective and their versions of grotesque includes incongruous, outlandish, and unique elements in modern fiction. From a narrower and more specific perspective, American Scholar Leslie Fiedler defines grotesque as the “mode of expression” of American southern Gothic literature (Spiegel, 1972).

At any rate, grotesque refers to a type of character which frequently occurs in literature that readers have come to accept the quality, noble or ignoble, beautiful or ugly, of a story; or its keynote, light or dark, sad or joyous; or its means of expression, fantasy or realism, romance or myth. Besides, grotesque has his distinguishing characteristic traits, which always appear in literature involving either a physically or mentally deformed figure (Spiegel, 1972). If a person appears as one of the physically deformed, he may be a cripple, a dwarf, a deaf mute or a blind man; if a person appears as one of the mentally deformed, he may be an idiot, a mad-man or an abnormal figure. However, such kind of deformity will not separate this person from readers, instead it will bring the person closer to us. In addition, what is worthy of mentioning is that grotesque depends on not only the physically or mentally deformed object itself, but also our conventions, prejudice, commonplaces, banalities, and mediocrities as our perceptions of the physical world change as the world changes (Harpham, 1976). For an object to be grotesque, three responses should be invoked: laughter, astonishment and disgust or horror. The characteristic themes of the grotesque — the plague, the dance of death, the masked ball, to name a few — jeopardize or shatter our conventions by opening onto vertiginous new perspectives characterized by the destruction of logic and regression to the unconscious-madness, hysteria, or nightmare.

2.2. The Grotesque in American Southern Gothic Fiction

It’s Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) who brought the European Gothic winds to the American soil and started the Gothic tradition in American fiction; Washington Irving (1783-1859), the first American writer with international reputation, also created some stories with Gothic elements such as “The Legend of sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle” (Wang, 2003). Numerous uncertainties in young American society plagued people, which determined the original and fundamental themes of the American Gothic novel, such as the disintegration of the family, incest, pornographic murder, racial violence. All this could not be separated from the fear of self, the fear of loneliness and homelessness, the turmoil in the mind and so on. Among the Anglo-American Gothic works, the creation of Allan Poe (1809-1849) was a turning point.

In Poe's writings, the focus of the Gothic tradition shifted from supernatural horror to the decay and horror of people's minds (Wang, 2003).

Then, under Faulkner's pen, American southern Gothic fiction (Hereafter southern Gothic) took on serious social, religious, and ethical significance and depth. His distinction was "to show how nothing less than the Gothic mode is fully able to express the reality of the South" (Lloyd-Smith, 2009, p. 61), for it was closely connected with the Civil War. The War, bringing real fear and cruelty, created chances for southern Gothic. The defeated South was unable to face the tragic reality and cannot accept that its glory had been lost. Such a conservative and nostalgic sentiment provided a hotbed for southern Gothic, and relative writers conceived a series of weird, morbid, melancholy, and paranoid Gothic figures on the ruins of the South. Consequently, grotesque has become one of the most notable features of southern Gothic, which was not only reflected in the Gothic characters, but also in Gothic environment, imagery, plots and the theme in that the American South has plenty of "Gothic" material to represent all aspects of Gothic subculture, concerning religion, society, politics, psychology, and the most prominent of them, slavery and racism. In a nutshell, a complex aggregation and cultural psychological mechanism has been formed because of the relative network among Gothic fiction.

It is hard to deny that southern literature has always been bristled with political elements due to its history (Wang, 2009). The changes brought about by the war led to the unique psychological state of the southerners as mentioned above. After the defeat of the Civil War, the southern economy declined sharply, the agriculture was depressed, the ethnic contradictions emerged one after another, and the historical tradition was facing the crisis of extinction. All this made the southerners generally produce a sense of failure, guilt, frustration and loss, and resulted in the grotesque deformity, loneliness, nostalgia, dream evil and sin in literature.

In addition to the defeated history, the tradition of Christian culture has also contributed a lot to the grotesque in Southern Gothic. A large number of early immigrants were Puritans and loyal followers of Calvinism, which had a strong influence on the United States. Calvinism emphasized the views of "original sin" and "human nature is evil", and considered that people could not improve themselves. It did not believe in change and progress of the society, and holds a skeptical, boycotting and opposing attitude towards all kinds of new ideas. It was precisely because of the influence of the theory of original sin that southern writers generally believed that people could not overcome some fundamental problems, especially the tendency of "evil" in human nature. Among the evils, sex was the core issue and abstinence were one of the basic doctrines of Calvinism (Wang, 2003). Faulkner and some other writers treated this as a factor of moral exploration and a way to show the conflict between the good and the evil. In their writings, it was easy to detect a method of taking sexual metamorphosis, incest and abnormal love as the means of moral exploration of both people and the society, which caused the sexual metamorphosis or human nature distortion.

The artistic writing styles of Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) had great influences on the grotesque in south Gothic. Poe's works started to explore the psychological aspect of horror novels. His rich and strange imagination added a mysterious and grotesque atmosphere to his horror novels. Hawthorne was good at revealing the inner conflict and psychological description of characters, and his works have a strong religious atmosphere and mysterious color. His words were obscure and filled with gloomy tone. Both of them had made great impacts on Faulkner's grotesqueness (Wang, 2003).

Faulkner was in highly active, painful and unbalanced mental state brought by the Civil War. Therefore, in his fiction, there was a grotesque feature that objectively came down in one continuous line with modernist literature and was rich in southern color (Liu, 2003). In his art world, the characters were driven by passion and desire, and they were full of failure emotion and all kinds of worries and feelings of loss. Faulkner had special, unusual, and heavy feelings for his characters, the American southern society and tradition. It was such feelings and

experiences that drove him to depict strange pictures of the American south. All this can be adequately revealed in Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," which is a representative of southern Gothic.

3. The Grotesque in "A Rose for Emily"

3.1. The Grotesque Embodied in Characters

The most typical character showing the grotesque in the story is Emily Grierson. Her grotesqueness can be analyzed from several perspectives: her dwelling environment, her appearance, nostalgia, and metamorphic psychology.

Born to a noble family in the South, Emily perpetuates her pristine importance by immuring herself in a massive, impregnable, outmoded house and successfully and secretly conceal in that house until her death. Emily's living place is full of darkness and she stays in a house where the sun does not penetrate. Through the description of the first part of the story, we know that because she does not go out of the house for a long time and thus the color of her skin is white and swells like a corpse due the lack of the exposure to the sun. This is one of the points showed her grotesqueness. For example, Faulkner describes Emily's appearance as follows:

She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand. (Faulkner, 2018, p. 546)

From the words "bloated", "pallid", readers can visualize her lurid face as that of a corpse; And "motionless", "coal" also reveal her lifelessness; besides, "[h]er eyes, lost in the fatty ridges", "coal pressed into a lump of dough of her face", so readers could recognize her whole face. Transferred epithet, metaphor, and association of activity and inertia are used in these sentences, hence disgusted and horrible elements can be easily detected by readers. Emily not only encloses herself in the house, but also keeps time in the past forever, which is the illustration of her nostalgic feeling. A typical example is when local officials ask her to pay taxes, she refuses doing that because Colonel Sartoris promises to her, but actually, Colonel Sartoris has already been dead. The sentence "Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care" (Faulkner, 2018, p. 545) fully illustrates her nostalgia.

Emily has a ticking clock, which indicates Emily's inner world, and reveals Emily's change from the purity and goodness of the past to the decay of all this. What's more, Emily's tragedy and grotesqueness stems from her extreme desire to control real life, which is influenced by his father's control (a patriarchal society). After her father's death, she can control her own destiny. However, this only leads her to another extreme --her "corpse fetishism", concerning Homer, "a Yankee-a big, dark, ready man". Homer abandons her and her spirit is stimulated, so she decides to keep Homer in an extreme way. She goes to the drugstore to buy arsenic, secretly poisons Homer, and hides his corpse in a room, which is decorated as a wedding room. From Emily's dwelling environment and her appearance, nostalgia, and metamorphic psychology, it is no hard for readers to experience an overwhelming fear caused by Emily's grotesqueness.

3.2. The Grotesque Embodied in Environment and Atmosphere

The grotesque can also be found in the atmosphere, which is closely related to the physical environment and the plot. The grotesque atmosphere can be found in Emily's house. In the beginning, the author describes the outside of the house: "lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps-an eye sore among eyesores" (Faulkner, 2018, p. 545). Also, when the deputation visits her, they are admitted by "the old Negro" (a sole

person being seen from her house} “into a dim hall from which a staircase mounted into still more shadow” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 546). Faulkner describes this house ranging from outside surface to inside lifelessness, darkness and disgusting smells, which combines vision with smell, to create a gloomy, depressed, and horrible atmosphere and hence make readers feel disgusted. At the end of the story, there is a description concerning Emily’s room where nobody has known before -- “A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished for a bride... the man himself lay in the bed” (Faulkner, 2016, p. 554). Such a description of a delicate wedding room combined with a dead man provides people with a feeling of gruesomeness.

The grotesque atmosphere can also be found easily in the arrangement of the plot: The whole story is told by “we”, but actually we don’t know who “we” are. The unknown narrator establishes a kind of mysterious and glum keynote. What’s more, other strange elements add to the mysterious and gloomy atmosphere. For example, after Homer Barron enters Emily’s house, “we” never see him again, but finally, “we” find that “[t]he man himself lay in the bed” in Emily’s house. Homer’s disappearance remains a puzzle until the end of the story. The story mentions that Emily’s house smells so bad that people in the town think it is the smell of food corruption in the kitchen. With the plot develops further, people grasp that the smell comes from the corpse and realize that Emily kills Homer and has slept with Homer’s corpse for years. This really makes readers feel disgusted in that no one can accept the fact that a lady might kill her lover and sleep with the corpse even if he has stank in their so-called “wedding room.”

3.3. The Grotesque Embodied in the Theme of Death

“A Rose for Emily” is a work surrounded by death to say the least. The whole background of this story is the Old South tradition which declined and went to death. Thus, the whole story is doomed to be covered with a depressed atmosphere. Based on such a premise, three people’s deaths can be found in the plot: The deaths of Emily, Emily’s father and Emily’s lover Homer.

The story begins with the sentence revealing Emily’s death: “When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 544). Concerning Emily’s death, apart from the description in the first paragraph, relevant sentences can also be found at the end of the story: “we” talked of Miss Emily and “waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 545). In the middle part of the story, Emily’s father dies, which is revealed by the sentences such as “[t]hat was two years after his father’s death”, and “[a]fter her father’s death she went out very little” (Faulkner, 2018, 547). In the end, readers can see another picture of death -- “The man himself lay in the bed,” which reveals Homer’s death (But actually, there are many implications revealing his death in the story, such as some poison bought by Emily and a foul odor from Emily’s house). In addition, in the second paragraph of this story, items like “cedar bemused cemetery” and “anonymous graves” (Faulkner, 2018, p. 545) can be found as well, which can be regarded as another illustration of death.

What should be mentioned is that Faulkner puts these “three kinds of death” into totally different contexts. When Emily loses her life, people in the town are all very excited — men for admiration and women for curiosity. However, when people see Homer lay in the bed with horrible body, they behave extremely calmly without too much fear and shock. It is undoubtedly abnormal for them to behave like this because that is totally illogical and unreasonable. For the former death, they are too excited without any pretentious sadness, while for the later, they show abnormal calmness without any mournfulness. Due to such an illogical and unreasonable plot, the grotesque is not difficult to detect.

In short, death is an indispensable element for illustrating the grotesque in “A Rose for Emily.” Faulkner mainly designs three people’s deaths. Anyhow, he also briefly denotes the soldiers’ death through the description of graves for sake of reflecting the grotesque of this area. To some degree, the deaths revealed in this story indicate the death of the old tradition. In such a social

background, the whole world bristles with the grotesque, while the local people are quite easy to have psychological diseases due to their discordance with the changing world.

4. Conclusion

The grotesque in "A Rose for Emily" is fully illustrated from various aspects such as the creating of the setting and atmosphere, characterization, the sublimation of the theme of death. This short story can serve as a mirror, through which people can learn about the historic changes during American Civil War. Emily is not only the symbol of the tradition, but also the symbol of nostalgia of the people. Her rebellion to the changes is the physical carrier of her grotesqueness, the product of that time, which permeates the whole southern place after the Civil War. "A Rose for Emily" presents a central conflict between a proud, doomed but indomitable last representative of a southern family and the progress of an encroaching and usurping civilization. This study reconfirms that there are great impacts of the social changes and the external environment on the personal psychology and ideologies in American southern states.

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