

Symbolic meaning of color in *A Rose for Emily*

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Abstract: William Faulkner, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1950, is a prominent American writer. *A Rose for Emily* is one of his most famous short story presenting the change of southern society after the American Civil War. The color symbol is deemed as an indispensable artistic feature in *A Rose for Emily*. It plays an irreplaceable role in exploring into Emily's character, depicting the environment and highlighting the subject. This thesis deals with "symbols" and "color symbols" in literature and systematical interpretation of color symbols which embody the contrast between past glories and current decay of southern society, Emily's change and also racial issues.

Key words: color; symbolic meaning; the south; the north

1 Introduction

A Rose for Emily was published on April 30, 1930. It was a tragic story about an eccentric woman named Emily Grierson who fell in love with a northerner called Homer Barron. However, Homer gradually became tired of her. At last, Emily killed him and slept with his corpse for decades.

The writer William Faulkner is one of the most important writers in Southern American literature. Due to unfortunate childhood experiences, he developed autism. This is fully reflected in Miss Emily Grierson who is self-contained and aloof from the outside world. In *A Rose for Emily*, the writer expresses his love and mercy to the south.

When mentioning *A Rose for Emily*, the symbolic meaning of "a rose" will be first considered. In *Symbolic Meanings of Rose in A Rose for Emily*, Xia Zugui elaborates on the triple symbolic meanings of "Rose" through the three stages of Emily's love pursuit process, and thus the harm of the patriarchic society to Emily is concluded finally [1]. Besides, many scholars study from Faulkner's respect to southern tradition and attempt to find the main cause of Emily's tragedy. Xiao Minghan, in his *Why Should Give a Rose for Emily*, puts forward that Emily's tragedy is not caused by the conflict between the old and the new order, but by the residents in Jefferson town and its tradition of Puritan as its core [2]. Emily's doings reflects the internal factor of the southern failure and the vileness of the aristocratic nature [3].

At present, there are few studies on the symbolic meaning of color at home and abroad. Therefore, my thesis intends to contribute a bit to the issue.

This thesis attempts to probe into the symbolic meaning of color in the novel. M.H Abrams defined the term "symbol" in his article "Symbol" in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as anything which signifies something [4]. In *A Rose for Emily*, color symbols as private symbols run through the whole story and play the irreplaceable role in disclosing one's character, depicting the environment, forming the contrast, and highlighting the subject.

2 Colors in *A Rose for Emily*

In *A Rose for Emily*, many colors are involved to depict the environment and characters. In this chapter, colors will be divided into three classifications, that is light colors and dark colors, warm colors and cold colors, white skin and dark skin.

2.1 Light color and dark color

Light color and dark color are classified by lightness according to one's visual experience. In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner used some light and dark colors with sharp contrast. Three periods of Emily's life are chosen as good examples.

Before the death of Emily's father, Emily is a girl of "slender figure in white". Her father is responsible for her safety so she is ignorant of worldly affairs. The color "white" means purity and holiness. The other one is Grierson's white house, which is "a big, squarish frame house" painted in white and is "decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of seventies" [5]. If the former "white" presents Emily's purity and gentility, the latter "white" embodies her high birth. Emily's life is simple and dignified before her father's death.

The second is the period after her father's death. The day after her father's death, Emily claims that he is not dead, and there is no trace of grief on her face. It is evident that Emily can't accept the sudden change. From a carefree lady to a poor orphan, Emily tries to keep the holy southern tradition and dignity in her mind and pretends to be calm. In fact, she breaks down and is sick for a long time. In this period, although no specific colors appear, the tragic and serene atmosphere is almost certain.

The third period is the time after Emily killed Homer. During the next few years, her hair attains an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray and up to the day of her death it is still that vigorous iron-gray. Faulkner used "pepper-and-salt", "vigorous" to depict her iron-gray hair which reflects her dog's life. The "gray" here silently recount a poor woman's tragic life which shows that Emily is old either in appearance or in spirit. In addition, when the next generation comes to ask about the taxes, Emily is dressed in black, with a thin gold chain. "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".

2.2 Warm color and cold color

Warm color and cold color are the attributes of color which connects colors with people's feelings and imagination. This chapter will make clear the attribute of warm and cold colors in four periods of Emily's life.

One year after Emily's dark period of her father's death, a Yankee Homer, changed Emily's spirit. She is brought to life. Their "yellow-wheeled buggy" shows their budding romance. The "yellow" seems rays of the sun, warming and brightening both Emily's hearts. Emily and Homer sat on the lawn and kept whispering. That feeling is so wonderful and the atmosphere is warmed by their love.

But happy times are always brief. Although Homer himself says he likes men and he is not a married man, Emily still sits with him in a shiny carriage with her head high in the glittering buggy. In contrast to Homer's cold attitude, the word "glittering" and yellow color look like a trick. The golden flames in Emily's heart is poured out mercilessly all of a sudden by a bowl of ice water. Her spirits breaks down and is determined to poison her lover.

The fourth period is Emily's death. Miss Emily's bridal chamber is meticulously depicted by Faulkner as "tomb-like" bridal: "upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured". The chamber seems like a chilly cold, merciless mortuary without any sunshine and vitality in which Miss Emily struggles through forty years with a died man she once deeply loved. And again silver, different from the "silver" in former text, the silver here is not so sweet, it's Emily's unattained love.

2.3 White skin and dark skin

In ancient times, the concept of "chosen people" was used to rationalize the governing of one ethnic group over another one. According to Calvin, God "elected" some people to be saved and condemned others to damnation; each person's destiny has been determined before birth, and no one could change that predetermined fate [7].

Marger stated that "the essential biological meaning of race is a population of humans classified on the basis of certain hereditary characteristics that differentiate them from other human groups" [8]. Usually the physical features such as skin color, hair texture and facial shape were regarded as signs of a race.

Whites' superiority gave rise to their prejudice against blacks, which was one of the causes for the production of racism in the past. In *A Rose for Emily*, Miss Emily Grierson, is an American southern aristocrat and obviously she is a white woman. American southern aristocrats that Miss Emily represents have access to various privileges for they think they are the god chosen people.

Certainly, it's quite easy to notice that there is a Negro man who is Emily's servant Tobe. Besides, there is a description of Negro woman: mayor Colonel Sartoris "fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron" [6]. The black especially black woman was bound to be distained in American South before Civil War.

The white and the black were not comparable at that time. Their relations were both contradictory and interdependent. This issue will be discussed in the next chapter.

3 Symbolic meaning of colors

In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner does not pick every objects arbitrarily or aimlessly. In this part, the symbolic meaning of colors will be analyzed from three aspects: social environment, Emily's life, and relations between the white and the black.

3.1 Symbolic meaning of light color and dark color

Great changes occurred in America in the 19th century. The old southern tradition was threatened by the tremendous power of the north. People tried to maintain the traditional values, but the immense power of the rapidly developing industrious society destroyed the old tradition. Under this circumstance, *A Rose for Emily* was created by Faulkner. The light and dark color symbolize the traditional south and the industrial north and their decay and rise.

3.1.1 The Traditional south and the industrial north

The American South was a rather complex area in the past. It was such a mythical environment where states' rights were important and slavery and the effects of the Civil War had left a definite mark on mores and attitudes. In general, the south was one of the most creative sections of American society.

However, capitalist economy of north developed very quickly before the Civil War, and the plantation slavery of the American South became the biggest obstacle of economic development. The decayed south tradition was replaced by industrial north. Therefore, the industrial north turned to a bright lamp in the development of capitalism.

In *A Rose for Emily*, there are two periods associated with light color. One is the period when Grierson is alive, and the other is the period when she falls in love with Homer. In the early time, Emily's father "a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip". It is easy to see the hidden clues from the sentence: the "overprotection" of Mr. Grierson to Emily is fatal to Emily's life without which she can't even live a normal life. People believe that the Griersons hold themselves a little too high for what they really are. "None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such". The pure life of Emily is totally given by her father. The deep southern traditional values are implied in this period. In the second period, Emily's willingness to accept a northerner shows that she tries to make some changes of her life indicating that the trend of industrial north cannot be halted.

3.1.2 Decay of the South and rise of the North

Emily's father is the typical representative of the old southern values. In that patriarchal society, he tried to "dominate" or "control" his daughter in the name of protection. Her father overprotected the traditional morals so no one could support the family with deep-rooted old values like him. After he died, Emily's last weak struggle was defeated by the changing society. Her gradual surrender represents the beginning of decayed south.

So high-hearted Emily fell in love with a northerner and was ready to marry him, representing that she accepted the northern culture. Emily's last faith in the southern civilization wavered. When Emily was betrayed, her gray hair not only meant her growing old but also meant that the force of traditional south was about to wither away.

When the next new generation asked for taxes, Emily entered with the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. This detail further indicates that Emily struggles to keep her past glories but it is gone as time goes by. The prompt rise of the northern industry destroys her illusion. She has to bow to the northern industry as everything that has relations to southern tradition gradually decays.

Emily died at 74-year-old. "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care". Her death is the fall of the monument, the monument of the traditional south.

At the beginning of the story, two images "garages and cotton gins" could not be neglected. Their juxtaposition symbolizes the confrontation between two different cultures.

Cars are the production of the northern industrial civilization of capitalism. The invention of cotton gins promotes the plantation of cottons which makes the south become a real "cotton kingdom" and leads to the expansion of slavery. Ironically, it is precisely the expansion of slavery in the south triggers the outbreak of the Civil War. The slavery is beaten by the powerful north and the south goes to the road of industrialization gradually. The cotton gin plays the role of a terminator to some extent.

3.2 Symbolic meaning of warm color and cold color

From a youth to an old woman, Emily not only looks different, but also changes greatly in psychology. Warm and cold color in the story stand for the process of her going to abnormal world.

3.2.1 Early and late time in Emily's life

Mr. Grierson arranged everything for Emily when she was a girl so Emily was carefree. Her early time was surrounded by warmth and brightness.

The real tragedy began from Homer. After his refusal, Emily tried her best to ingratiate herself with him. She still wished to change her rigid life in her own way. It was Homer's disappearing that cast a damp over Emily's enthusiasm. The tone remains cold until she died. Even her beautiful rosy curtains and furniture were abnormally implicit with a tinge of cold and gloomy. This period is synonymous with the terms coldness, chillness and frost. Hence, the cold color is the good reflection of her late time.

3.2.2 Fall of the normal and rise of the abnormal

Broadly-defined abnormal psychology refers mainly to the basically normal person who produces the psychology of going beyond the normal condition once in a while under certain conditions. Narrowly-defined abnormal psychology refers to the person whose whole spirit is basically in abnormal state mainly and his spirit has already been totally twisted [9]. In the short story, Emily's change from normal psychology to distorted personality is obvious to our readers.

Generally speaking, Emily is a normal southern woman with humility, forbearance and gentleness at early time.

When she fell in love with Homer, town people viewed her love as "humiliation" or "degeneration". Emily didn't not have a supporter. When individuals lack social support, they will feel frustrated and escape herself. Due to a long-term lack

of communication or refusal to communicate with the outside world, Emily's deep feelings cannot be expressed, leading to serious psychological abnormalities and personality distortion. After Homer betrayed her, Emily made crazy moves to "protect" her love.

Emily represents the primitive impulsion and a variety of instinctive desires. As a woman, she hides her innermost instinct feelings and she is also eager to obtain men's admiration and love. However, the instincts and desires cannot find its opportunity to vent. The traditional concept, patriarchal society, and southern womanhood torture her and cause her to go crazy while result in the rise of the abnormal.

3.3 Symbolic meaning of skin

In the the early 20th century, the black only could had a low-paying job and were discriminated by the white; but on the other hand, the white relied on the Negro to live to some extent. They were exclusive as well as coexistent.

3.3.1 Black skin discrimination

Slavery in the United States was a form of forced labor which existed as a legal institution on American soil before the founding of the United States, and remained a legal feature of American society until 1865. Discrimination against the black slaves is also showed in *A Rose for Emily*.

At the beginning of this story, Faulkner mentioned that the mayor—Colonel Sartoris "fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron". And when Homer Barron came as a foreman, the Negro as day laborers were always cussed by him. In addition, there was a Negro named Tobe who appeared now and then in the story. He was a loyal servant of Grierson's family. The condition of slaves before the Civil War was worse than pigs and dogs. They were tortured by the slave-masters.

In *A Rose for Emily*, slavery system makes Tobe live a life of walking corpse. He had no freedom of speech and action, so "He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse". As a matter of fact, the Negro has been suffering from aphasia under the long pressure. Only after Emily died, did the Negro become a free man.

3.3.2 Coexistence with the Black

The white thought they were the God's chosen people, they excluded the black. On the other hand, their wealth were indirectly supplied by those slaves. It might be the truth that the white could not live without the black. Their coexistent relation was not formed within a day.

Similarly, Emily's trivial things were arranged by her Negro servant, Tobe. "The only sign of life about the place was the Negro man—a young man then—going in and out with a market basket", "Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket". Emily's late life almost relied on Tobe.

Faulkner himself also showed much sympathy for the black, felt guilty conscience as a member of the south and was disgusted with slavery system. He pointed that black slaves are kindhearted and loyal, and the first morality of the slaves is "wait, bear and the ability of existence [10]. Faulkner set the contrast between the white skin and the black skin not only to show their exclusion but to imply that the black as a vital part had already become inseparable from the white.

4 Conclusion

The theme of this thesis is concerned with color symbols. The research begins with the classification of colors in *A Rose for Emily*. Faulkner uses light and dark colors to present the traditional south and the industrial north and indicates decay of the south and rise of the north. The warm color and cold color stand for Emily's life, embodying the fall of the normal and the rise of the abnormal. Last but not least, the white skin and black skin symbolize not only exclusion from the white but also coexistence with the black.

In conclusion, a better understanding of both Faulkner and this short story will be achieved through an interpretation of the color symbols. The mental pains have nowhere to talk about, and *A Rose for Emily* is the voice that Faulkner speaks for a tragic woman, Emily.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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