

An Analysis of the Heroines in *The Grass Is Singing* and *The Sound and the Fury* from the Perspective of Feminism

Zhang Fen¹, Leng Hailian^{2,*}

¹School of Humanities and Law, Fuzhou Technology and Business University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China

²School of Humanities and Law, Fuzhou Technology and Business University, Fuzhou, Fujian, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: *The Grass Is Singing* was published in 1950 and attracted great attention of literary critics. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* tells the story of the Compson's family that is going to decay and collapse. This essay takes feminism as the background. It analyzes the reasons that result in the tragedies of Mary and Caddie through the description of their growing environment and social status, revealing the inequality between men and women in that society.

Keywords: feminism; Mary; Caddie; social status; tragedy

1. Introduction

The article will first introduce briefly the two authors and the plot summary of the two novels. Then it will focus on the history and features of feminism and analyzes the two female protagonists' female status, tragedies and reasons.

2. A brief introduction to the novels

When *The Grass Is Singing* came out in 1950, it received a great deal of attention from the circle of literature. It tells the story about Mary, who is a native white born in Southern Africa. Because of poverty in her family, she is instinctively eager to get rid of the living conditions that are similar to the native black people. When she was a child, her father was upset with his work and released his anger to his family. Mary's mother had to bear double oppression of poverty and her husband. Therefore, Mary grows up in a love-lacked family and is scared of sex which she thinks is a punishment that woman must accept. When she works, her living standard improves to some extent, but she is forced to get marry because of public opinions. She finds that she is experiencing what her mother experienced. Dick, Mary's husband, devotes all his energy to his farm business and is indifferent to Mary. They finally lived a separate life. Moses, the black employee of the farm, breaks in Mary's world, and makes her live a new life. Mary is attracted by Moses and has sex with him and their relationship is discovered later.

Because racial discrimination is prevailing in Southern Africa, it is destined that what encountered them must be miserable fate. Mary finally breaks up with Moses due to social oppression, and Moses kills Mary out of wrath. Moses doesn't escape from the scene as he originally planned to but waits for the police to come. *The Grass Is Singing* makes the world shocked when it was published and it was prevailing in Europe and the Untied States. The title of the novel *The Grass Is Singing* represents the inner awakening of females and desire for power, especially for women living in African countries.

William Faulkner's masterpiece was *The Sound and the Fury*. The title was originated from the famous lines in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*: "It's a tale told by idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The collapse and tragedy of a decaying family-the Compsons, or the collapse and tragedy of the old Southern America was depicted in the novel. The novel focuses on the innocent childhood and corruption of the Compson's daughter, Caddie, who never appears in front of readers directly. There are four parts in the novel with one person to narrate each part of it. The first part is narrated by Benjy. Through the eyes of Compson's youngest son, an idiot, Benjy, it depicts the surrounding world and the declining family. The second part is told by Quentin, the eldest son. It mainly focuses on the memory, thoughts, somniloquism, subconscious activities and real life of Quentin. The third part is shown from

the perspective of Jason, the second son of Mrs. Compson. Jason hated Quentin very much because he doesn't make a position for Jason in bank, and this fully demonstrated his selfish mentality. The last part is recounted by Dilsey, who is the devoted black servant of Compson's family. With her observation of the family, and her inner monologue complementing the plot of the novel, she reflects the strength of human nature.

3. A brief introduction to the feminism

Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social rights for woman that are equal to those of men[1].

Creating equal chances for women both in education and employment is one of the goals of feminism. There are three waves in the development of modern feminist movements with each wave handling different facets of the same feminist issues. The first wave appeared in the second half of 19th century, synchronizing with the European industrial revolution, and Harriet Tyler Mill was the representative. That woman should enjoy economic rights as man was the initial appeal. They required woman liberation mainly from the aspect of economy, which exerted influential impacts on later feminist movement, especially the socialist feminist movement. The most well known literature works of this stage were *Nora* written by Yi Pusheng, and *Anna Karenina* written by Lev Tolstoy. In America, on behalf of National Woman Suffrage Association, Elizabeth Cady Stanton asked federal congress to allow woman to join the political vote but was refused several times. Finally the Nineteenth Amendment(1920) was passed, and women had some political rights but are still far away from participating in politics.

The second wave of feminism appeared in the early 20th century to 1960s. After undergoing the World War One and World War Two, the global systems established by western world were broken down rapidly and new conflicts appeared.

Also, feminism was divided into three schools after undergoing such changes. They were socialist feminism represented by Juliette Mitchell, liberal feminism represented by Folidan, and radical feminism represented by Kate Millet. Socialist feminism paid attention to the economic status and material life of woman, they insisted that men and women be equal in economy and class struggle[2]. Liberal feminism strove for legislative protection as main appeal, protecting women's political rights positively.

Appearing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the third wave of feminism starts as a reaction to become aware of the failures of the second wave and to fight against proposals made and movements created by the second wave. Third wave feminism distinguished itself from the second wave with issues of sexuality, challenging female heterosexuality and celebrating sexuality as a means of female empowerment. The Third wave of feminism also seeks to challenge or avoid the absolute definition of feminism that the feminists of second wave considers, which, they argue, exaggerated the experience of upper middle class white women.

4. An analysis of the heroines in the two novels from the perspective of feminism

I will discuss Mary and Caddie in detail in the following paragraphs.

4.1 Heroines

Mary spent her childhood in poverty. The quarreling parents cast shadows in her heart, and she is influenced by her parents' and the community's prejudiced opinions toward black natives, which make her resist man and marriage instinctively. She hopes to live a single and independent life. But by the age of 30, the peculiar views and malicious remarks of the public make her upset and realize that she has to find a husband. When she meets Dick, she is eager to marry him though she doesn't love him. She rests her hopes on Dick's farm, which she thinks must be filled with an atmosphere of the nature. However, the reality always seems cruel than the ideal. Dick's farm is in poor running. Mary tries her best to improve such condition, but it doesn't work. She just felt a sense of disappointment. Every day she spends in the house is tedious. Finally, she decides to return to the town where she works before, but she is declined because she has married. She has no options, only to come back to the farm and live a life like her mother.

When Dick is afflicted by disease, she is compelled to manage the farm, which means that she has to confront black servants in the farm. Despite the fact that she receives secondary education and is somewhat influenced by democratic thoughts, there is bias in her subconsciousness that black people are disobedient and untrustworthy, so she is hostile to the black people. The way she speaks with the native black is always very rude, unconvincing, and impatient. And Moses is one of the victims, he decides to quit his job on the farm after being treated like animals. When Mary hears the news, due to her inner complexity, she cries in the face of Moses.

Since then, Moses treats Mary kindly and gives her a lot of comfort. Mary gradually makes a contrast between her husband and Moses, and she finds that Moses is more attractive than her husband, who is a man without soul. Later, Mary has a sexual relationship with Moses but is discovered by Tony, a British young man and like most white people, he discriminates the black and can not accept the relationship between the white and the black. Therefore, he chides Moses for such behavior and drives him away. At the same time, Mary's racial consciousness reminds her that she is white and superior to the black, and there always exists border between the white and the black. Moses is requested to leave the farm. Although she regrets treating Moses like that, it is too late.

Caddie is the most lovable figure created by Faulkner. He remarked Caddie as "the beautiful one, she was my heart's daring. I fell in love with one of my characters, Caddie, I love her so much that I couldn't decide to give her life just for the duration of a short story. She deserves more than that.[3]"

Caddie performed the role of mother although she is young. She shows consideration for her younger brother Benjy. She gives him warmth and care which can hardly get from their mother, Mrs. Compson. When Mrs. Compson calls Benjy "*Poor Baby.*" Caddie comforts him by saying "*you are not a poor baby, are you, you've got your Caddie. Haven't you got your Caddie.*" When Benjy cries for no reason, Caddie always tolerates him, which forms a sharp contrast to Mrs. Compson's indifference and disgust. Caddie always stands first to protect Benjy bravely when he is bullied by Jason.

Besides her maternal love towards Jason, she also has the rebellious spirit. When she is seven, she says that "*I'll run away, and never come back.*" She wants to do everything that boys can do, and aspires to go to school like her brother Quentin. She dares to disobey her mother's order, and her father's whipping can never scare her off. When she grows up, she still seeks to live a free life. But since she loses her virginity, her life has changed dramatically, and her family also has undergone great changes. Quentin commits suicide by jumping into river, because he finds it a unacceptable fact that his sister loses chastity. He associates virginity with the reputation of the family and even regards it more important than the life of himself. Caddie's father ends his life by drinking alcohol. Jason loses his job in bank and takes revenge on Miss Quentin, the daughter of Caddie. And for Benjy, Caddie is the only one in the world who gives him selfless love and care, but due to the fact that she loses virginity, it means that he will lose her forever. When Caddie accepts her mother's arrangement and marries a man she doesn't love, she is not courageous enough to resist. She is anxious to marry a man to cover the fact that she is conceived yet without marriage. But when her husband discovers that her baby is not his, he divorces with Caddie immediately, and Caddie is driven away from her family. And when her daughter escapes from family, all her hopes are shattered. Therefore, she steps on the road of self-destruction and becomes a prostitute and mistress of a Nazi general.

4.2 Female Status

In the background of patriarchal culture, men are in the dominant position, while women are considered as attachment of men or even in the oppressed status. Mary is a good case of the point.

Mary spends her childhood in poverty and makes efforts to improve her living condition, but she fails under all kinds of restraints. According to the traditional thoughts of that time, a woman has to find a man to marry when she reaches the proper age. If she doesn't, there will be gossips about her. In addition, Mary's mother has the deep slave thought. She believes that supporting a family is absolutely the responsibility of men, and women are just attachment to men. And this thought affects Mary in a great degree in her marriage.

Therefore, if Mary doesn't get married in her thirties, she has to bear those gossips, which makes her miserable and anxious. Although she pursues freedom, she has no options but to get married under the force of public gossips. She thinks that she can live a tranquil and happy life after she gets married while the reality is that her husband is obsessed with lands and can't manage lands well. All the attempts he does failed, just like Mary's father, who is a life loser. Under the social system that women should subordinate men, women are requested to stay at home and do some housework if they marry,

there are no working posts for them. So when Mary comes back to the company where she worked before, she is refused because she is a married woman. She notices that there is no future for her, everything is illusory[4]. When Mary proposes to bear a child to rely on, it is turned down by her husband because their financial condition can not afford a child. She expects little for the future after her suggestion is refused.

Women should be viewed as an individual, which is always emphasized in the works of feminism. Simone de Beauvoir proposed for the first time in his book *The Second Sex* “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” In that society, Mary exists as subsidiary but not as an individual. She never has the chance to live an ideal life as she anticipates. She is defeated by the cruelty of life. Her social status is so inferior that she fails to realize that all her efforts to change her conditions are in vain.

Female figures play an important role in Faulkner’s works. Most of her females are victims of the doctrine of woman in the South of America. In the South, the whole society is male-centered and men have supremacy. Women are inferior and their bodies and lives all belong to men and families. Woman’s virginity is thought highly. The lost of virginity not only means the shame of the woman herself, but also brings bad reputation to her whole family. People thinks it for sure that women should not have passion and sexual desire. The main position in the South is occupied by men, which can be seen more obviously after the Civil War. The prosperity before war is replaced by the long term depression after war. The destruction of traditional values brings to new generation pain, horror, and confusion. They can not forget the old tradition of the South. Therefore, women become victims under such environment. Woman’s normal desires are interpreted as the source of evil and protecting the virginity of women becomes the holy task of men.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Caddie is the typical example of one of the victims. Her virginity symbolizes the reputation of Compson’s family, so great changes have taken place both in her own life and her family when she loses it. Finally she steps on the road of self-destruction. As the heroines of the novel, she only exists in the memories of her brothers. She has no opportunity to tell story of her own. She is told by others and commented by others. She has no chance to speak to prove her existence. Every thing about her is at the mercy of the male society. The status of Caddie stands for that of the Southern females. They are a crowd of people without individual identification, without their own voices. They are confirmed, depicted, explained, possessed, loved, desired, or hated by others. They can never live a life of their own, never master their own fates, and never realize or even think to realize their dreams.

4.3 Tragedies and Reasons

The following is a detailed analysis of Mary and Caddie’s tragedies and reasons.

4.3.1 Mary

Being independent in economy is the first step to realize female independence, and this can not be seen in Mary. Mary marries Dick, a poor farm owner, in rush, because she hears some gossips about her. To escape these gossips and compensate her solitary inner world, she leaves the city and gets rid of her former independent life. She goes away with Dick blindly for the so-called new life. Dick has explained his poor condition to Mary cautiously, but she would rather believe that this kind of poverty is not related to her suffering childhood, it is totally another thing. She regarded it as a pleasant thing to fight with tough environment. Mary’s blindness in marriage foreshadows her tragedy.

Her marriage life is becoming harder and harder, because she is dependent on Dick, who is an incompetent man, to ensure her happy life. But even a sound proof can not be provided by her husband to escape from the scorching sun in Africa. It is the poverty in economy that makes Mary breaks down both physically and mentally. Although it is a truth that they ever struggle to improve their condition, Mary realizes the unfortunate fact of their marriage after all the attempts they make, such as keeping bees, pigs, chickens and starting business, end as failures. Such misery is beyond what she has ever imagined. She chooses to escape from this life, but when she comes to city again, there are no positions for her. She can not help but return to the farm to live a hopeless life.

Mary’s financial dependence on Dick is the fundamental reason of her tragedy. Another reason is that she lacks initiative awareness, and even accepts the traditional values of the male-centered society, which fastened the process of her destruction.

4.3.2 Caddie

Family is a word that symbolizes warmth and love, a place which is considered benefit to children's growth, also a place to provide shelter and comfort for children. In contrary, in *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson's family is a love-lacked family which is the direct cause for Caddie's tragedy. Mrs. Compson is an incompetent mother. She doesn't have warmth as a mother and wife, and is not concerned with her family, thus there is little solicitude can be expected from her. She is a typical southern woman, who always uses traditional moralities and ethics to restrain her little daughter, Caddie. When confronting Caddie's gradual maturity, instead of caring and communicating with her, she just blames her. As for Caddie, she goes out to seek love to compensate the love she can't get in her family. She kisses a boy when she is fifteen years old. In Mrs. Compson's eyes, it is immoral, because it goes against the rules of the southern woman system, which she abide by scrupulously. "She wears her black clothes and puts her veil on, crying as she says that her little daughter has died." She thinks that her daughter has degenerated and laments for her. She also asks Jason to keep an watch on Caddie. Under the control of her family, Caddie's normal desire can not be satisfied, both her body and mentality suffering great contortion.

Apart from her family, the male chauvinism in the south is the dominant reason of her tragedy^[5]. In the South, woman's virginity is considered highly. Southern women are taught and cultivated as pure women, who should not have emotion or sex desire. They are seen as tools for fertility and are not endowed with the right to seek their affection and liberty and the only thing they can do is to observe the rules set by the society.

Caddie is the victim of the society. The turning point of her life appears when she loses her chastity. Benjy, who is used to being cared and loved by Caddie, hopes that Caddie will company him forever but when Caddie loses her virginity, he realizes that he is going to lose her forever. When Quentin, who is obsessed with Caddie's virginity, hears Caddie's loss of virginity, he slaps her and even wants to kill her with knife. He regards her virginity as the honor of the family. The loss of virginity means shame and disaster to the family. Jason's attitude towards women is cynical. "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say." Jason utilizes Caddie to find some needs of his own. When Caddie's husband learns her past he divorces her. Therefore, Jason loses his promised job and his life prospects also is ruined. Jason hates Caddie and takes revenge on her little daughter. Living in such environment, Caddie is so desperate that she gives up herself and becomes the mistress of a Nazi general.

5. Conclusion

In *The Grass Is Singing* and *The Sound and the Fury*, both the heroines Mary and Caddie are the victims of the male society where discrimination towards women is common. Females exist just as tools to assist man in family. There is no freedom in their lives because of family bondage.

Doris Lessing shows us the tragedy of Mary in the map of patriarchal society. We can feel the oppression and persecution of women in the male society. The more unfortunate fact is that Mary admits the values of the society consciously, and follows the rules specifically set for women. When she can't tolerate the remarks about her single life, she quickly finds a husband whom she doesn't love, which leads to her arduous life later, and from that we can see that she steps on the road of catering to mundane opinions. Her marriage is not so ideal as she formerly imagines. She is financially attaches to her husband, which is the source of her tragedy. Therefore, if a woman in that society anticipates to improve her status and living conditions, being independent in economy is the basic requirement. Only under such condition can women pursue their love and live an independent life as males.

Caddie is another victim of the Southern society. In her childhood, she is a pure, caring, and helpful girl. When she is an adolescent, she desires for freedom and affection, due to lack of her parents' proper guidance and her brothers' discouragement, she loses her love. To protect the fame of her family she marries a man, but she is abandoned not long after her marriage. Her daughter is sent to her home while she is homeless. She admits her guilt and steps on the road of degeneration. From this we can learn that traditional men request that woman should not grow up and keep their virginity. For example, when Caddie uses perfume and kisses man, Benjy cries loudly, and Quentin can't accept the fact that her sister loses virginity, he commits suicide finally. Caddie finally compromises to the pressure from her family though she has the rebellious spirit.

In the novel *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary is a woman deserves sympathy. On one hand, she is always in a position of attachment in the southern society. In her marriage, she places her hope on her husband,

while her husband can't guarantee her life because of his inability. Later, she is allured by Moses who is a black servant. But due to the deep gap between the white and the black, their relationship is reproached by the society, so they break up, and she is killed by Moses. On the other hand, her awareness of being an individual is weak, which leads to her tragedy. When she reaches the age of marriage, she gives in to the public views and gets married quickly. The blindness of her marriage indicates her tragedy. Doris Lessing implies that if women want to extricate from attachment, they have to be independent and not rely on the forces of outside. They have to gain social status by themselves and do things following their inner demand.

Caddie is rebellious in her childhood, but when she loses her chastity she has to accept the arrangement of her mother, and is never as brave as before. Her rebellion is to fight against the society on behalf of Southern women in pursuit of their own value, the pursuit of equal rights with men and the normal physical needs. Her degeneration and destruction come from the pressure and torture from her family and society. Her desire for love is suppressed mercilessly and nobody can appreciate her suffering and sorrow. Old Southern society needs to sustain its foundation with the chastity of women. If they lose chastity they will be repelled and deplored by their families and the whole society. Caddie is the victim of the society, she degenerates for the purpose of survival. Faulkner depicts the figure of Caddie to disclose the corrupt practice of the male society and the harm and repression it casts on women.

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