

Fallen Monument: a Marxist Analysis of William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*

Shiying Feng

Minzu University of China, Beijing, China

Abstract: *William Faulkner as a great novelist in the 20th century has long been thought as a representative writer of American southern literature. And his short story A Rose for Emily has attracted extensive attention in literary circles with its distinctive narrative structure and fascinating plot. Many scholars have conducted in-depth discussions from different perspectives like writing skills, feminism research and psychological research, but so far none so much has been done from the perspective of Marxist criticism, which actually can not only provide a unique view to reveal the different fortunes of southern people that are undergoing the great social change after American Civil War but also help to uncover Faulkner's complex emotions towards his hometown, the south of the United States.*

Keywords: *A rose for emily, William faulkner, Marxism*

1. Introduction

Marxism as a school of literary criticism first has its roots in the 19th century writings of the German social critic and philosopher Karl Marx, and it first flourished as a pragmatic view of history that helps the working class change their world and their lives. But then in the 20th century a number of critics and writers started to embrace the principles of Marxism and employed them into their criticism that focus on the study of the relationship between a text and the society it represents. Like Marx they believe that in the capitalist economic mode economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities. So Marxist literary theory and criticism mainly put its focus on investigating the sociological issues behind the text to show how literature reflects society and how literary texts reveal truths about the social interactions.

2. Miss Emily Grierson: a Beneficiary and Victim of Classism

Marxism believes that through the tremendous power of economy, differences in the socioeconomic class will divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. In a market-based economy the actual process for producing, distributing and consuming goods accordingly differentiates people's function within the economic system and would inevitably divide them into different social classes, which later results in the appearance of classism. Miss Emily Grierson, the protagonist of *A Rose for Emily* is indeed a believer of classism which equates one's value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs. As a typical southern aristocrat, Emily takes various privileges in Jefferson in grand. She doesn't pay tax, overlooks all legal rules and keeps a "negro" in her house as old southern planters did. Even though she is just an isolated little woman who makes no contribution to the town, Emily and most townsmen still believe from beginning to end that she has something inborn that makes her better than other people who are only supposed to follow her rules without communicating with her as an equal individual. Her haughty attitude when buying the poison is a good example. When the druggist legally asks her the reason to buy arsenic, "*Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up*".

However, despite from so many financial and social benefits Emily receives from classism, she is also in nature a victim of this harmful belief. Because of her "inborn nobleness", her father drives away anything and anyone that goes against their traditions and people in the town see her pursuit of a free love a disgrace and bad example to the young. They even manage to prevent her to be with the one she truly loves. Therefore, when the modern ideas of equality come from the north to her hometown after Civil War, as an extreme believer of classism Emily has no choice but to lock herself in a closed house

so as to escape from the great social change happening outside and refuse to admit her own decline. She even murdered her lover due to the contempt of other's life. As a result, through depicting Emily's sickly isolated characteristic Faulkner is actually criticizing the dehumanizing effect of classism and indicating its final vanishment with the death of Emily.

3. The Impossible Love of Two "Aliens"

Alienation is also an important concept of Marxist criticism. Originally Marx just mainly focus on the alienated labor in the capitalist economy, but later various Marxist critics have extended it to much broader situations. The two main characters, Emily and Homer Barron are both obviously alienated in the short story. Although Homer is such a popular young man who "*would be in the center of the group whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square*", "we", the townspeople still don't think he deserves Emily and manage to prevent this impossible love between this outsider and our "monument", from which one can see that although the townsmen may not realize, they are literally conducting alienation in Marxism towards Homer which separates people out of a group with different economic situations or producing functions.

What's more, the townsmen at the same time also don't think Emily is one of them. At the beginning of the story she is described as "*a fallen monument*", "*a tradition, a duty, and a care*", instead of a normal resident of Jefferson. She is not human-like. Townspeople never treat Emily as a part of them, but a sort of obligation that is "*upon*" the town. However, at the same time she is also in their eyes a subject of gossip. People talk about her all the time but no one really cares about her. So for the townspeople Emily's position is actually either high upon the whole town, nor low as an alien whom they are free to comment and whose suicide "*would be the best thing*". Besides, Emily's house is also a symbol of alienation since no one could ever enter this house even the time it is exuding killing smells. So the house is actually like a castle of Emily that separates her, the alien, with other townsmen. Together with Homer, Emily spends the rest of her life in the isolated castle to realize this impossible love between the two aliens, which once again reveals the evil and cruelty of the old south society

4. Emily and "We": the Shift of Ideology

Marxism believes that among all approaches the ruling class adopt to control the poor, what really oppress them and even stop them to fight back is the so-called ideology. It refers to the belief system that masks itself as a natural way to see the world in order to blind people and keep them subservient to the ruling power system. An ideology is always shared by a generation of people, so after "*the new generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town*", a shift of people's ideas which in nature is the shift of a new ideology happens in the town. Unlike their parents who see Emily as a monument, the next generation own a brand-new set of values. They stop sending children to Emily's china-painting lessons and ask her to pay tax, making her totally be isolated with the society and left behind them. The different attitudes towards Emily from two generations indeed indicate the shift of ideology.

After Antonio Gramsci put forward the concept of hegemony, a term often used synonymously with ideology, Louis Althusser on this basis asserts that the dominant class's hegemony is never complete and such incompleteness suggests that alternative hegemonies exist and compete with dominant hegemony for supremacy. In *A Rose for Emily* this mixture and shift of hegemony is revealed obviously by the unique narration structure. Although in the whole story the narrator is always the so-called "we", it is obvious that in different period of Emily's life there are different "we" with different values to tell her story since the attitude of "we" often contradict to itself. For instance, when "we" first see Emily dating Homer, "we" agree on some old ladies' saying that "*Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner*", but when Emily once again be seen with Homer, "we" should say that "*She will marry him*". These divergent attitudes beyond doubt indicate that there is more than one narrator of "we", the townsmen that represent different ideologies which are competing and replacing each other. Besides, since the shift of "we" is not a linear one but always has a mixture of townsmen that share divergent ideologies at the same time, it reveals not only the gradual shift of hegemony by generations but also the confusion and struggle of southern people during a great social change after American Civil War.

5. Conclusion

William Faulkner as a representative American southern writer always owns a complicated emotion towards his hometown. In his short story *A Rose for Emily*, he on the one hand strongly criticizes the cruel and heartless society in the old southern America by depicting Emily's sick mentality caused by classism and alienation, on the other hand conveys his deep sympathy and love to southern people by revealing their confusion and struggle during the shift of social reality and ideologies in order to express his deep nostalgia towards the glorious old southern traditions. Rose is an emblem of love and all beautiful things, and for Faulkner the rose is not only for Emily but also for his beloved hometown which like Emily owns a glorious past but now is fading away.

References

- [1] Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice (A Second Printing)*. 5th ed., Pearson, 2011, pp.166-179.
- [2] Eagleton, Terry. "Literature and History." *Marxism and Literature Criticism*, University of California Press, 1976, pp. 1-15.
- [3] Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 53-61.
- [4] Eagleton, Terry. "The Author as Producer." *Marxism and Literature Criticism*, University of California Press, 1976, pp. 55-67.
- [5] Ollman, Bertell. *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society (Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics)*. 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 1977. pp. 131-158