



Style and Sense in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*

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ABSTRACT

A Rose for Emily is a typical Gothic-style novel, intimately associated with the characteristics of Gothic literature: 1. Ghostly and horrible environment; 2. The tone of death; 3. Uncanny character images. Generally speaking, Gothic literature reveals the gloomy, dark, sad and mysterious literary styles, but what fascinates us most is the creation of atmosphere—being horrific, thrilling and intensive, which give people different kinds of sensory touches—Visually, physically and even spiritually. This Gothic style places emphasis on both emotion and a pleasurable kind of terror, thus embodying the senses of a quest for a horrible atmosphere, and an appreciation of the joys of extreme emotion as well as the thrills of fearfulness to readers.

Keywords: A Rose for Emily; Style; Sense

Introduction

William Faulkner is one of the representative writers of the 20th century in the United States. In 1934, he published the famous short story "A Rose for Emily" in *The Forum*, a typical Gothic-style work. By rendering the mysterious and horrible atmosphere and shaping the weird behaviour of demon-like characters as well as the Gothic elements that always surround the theme of death, Faulkner deeply exposed the evils of the old traditions and systems of the southern American society and the destruction of human nature. In fact, as for Gothic literature, it is more important to read the intense and horrifying plot and then feel the strong "Gothic taste" than studying the theory and ideology.

1. Gothic Style

Britannica Concise Encyclopedia defines Gothic style as a form of European romantic novels that prevailed in the early 19th century, which were full of mystery and horror in the Middle Ages. Some novelists imitated Walpole and set the story in the Middle Ages; some writers took Catholic countries (especially Italy and Spain) as the background. The typical Gothic-style story is about an innocent heroine suffering from cruel and lascivious villains, which makes heavy use of ghosts, spooks and other macabre plots accompanied by madness, rage, superstition and revenge, etc. And the stories are often set in gloomy castles full of dungeons, underpasses, dark blockhouses, hidden gates and skateboarding institutions (Duckett, 2003, p. 354). The main purpose of this kind of novel is to depict the gloomy and terrifying atmosphere by describing various mysterious and horrific phenomena.

Among the literary traditions that have appeared since the 18th century, the Gothic style can be described as the most enduring. Despite that people's preferences for Gothic horror are sometimes strong and sometimes weak, the status of Gothic novels in the history of literature has also experienced ups and downs and the characteristics of Gothic creation have evolved with the changes in contemporary readers' reading tastes, the Gothic style has always existed in English and American literature. Although the definition of Gothic style has been constantly controversial and it is difficult to agree on its definition, some traditional features in Gothic literature clearly distinguish themselves from other genres. These Gothic features— Gothic elements, Gothic structures, Gothic imagery, Gothic characters constitute the "Gothic style" in literature. The creation of Gothic scenes and portrayal of Gothic characters arouse readers' senses such as surprise, sadness, sympathy and fear, causing readers to think rationally about human nature and the world (Wang, 2009, p. 7).

Scholars agree that the Gothic style is an open genre and its definition is also an open system. So it is quite difficult to reach a conclusion. But how to find a blending point between over-narrowing and over-generalization and avoid radical or extreme concepts is undoubtedly a rational and scientific attitude. First of all, the Gothic works of major Gothic writers recognized in history should be the main research object of

Gothic literature research. Secondly, many classic works written by British and American novelists endow strong Gothic elements, or Gothic paradigm, Gothic style, and Gothic creative methods, which add "Gothic" tags to these works. Regardless of whether they are called "Gothic style" or "Gothic creations" by researchers, they are both a sample and a son of Gothic literature in the world and should all become the research objects of Gothic literature.

Gothic style is not an open system with universal significance, but just a literary phenomenon that has passed away in the history of literature. The process began in 1764 with Walp's "*Fort Otranto*", and ended in 1834 with Anse Voss's sensory novel "*Rockwood*", lasting for 70 years. From English Gothic novels that originated in the mid-18th century to German Gothic Romance, to the Gothic tradition that arose in American literature at the end of the 18th century, to rationalist Goth, psychological Goth, female Goth and the post-colonial Goth in the 19th century, and to the horror Goth, the romance Goth, the vampire Goth and the postmodernism Goth that prevailed in the 20th century, the long line of "Goth" runs through all stages in European and American literature, which is trans-temporal and cosmopolitan. Gothic style is not a fixed type of fiction in history but a form of pan-horror fiction since the 18th century. This form of fiction has continued to this day, not only including the Gothic novels that have been recognized in history but also including spiritual novels, horror novels and even some horror classics in the 19th and 20th centuries. Faulkner's Gothic short story "*A Rose for Emily* (1931)" is widely regarded as a model of Southern Gothic novels (Wang, 2009, p. 90). The story tells an old noble virgin in Jefferson Town of the South who poisons his lover because of hate caused by love, living with the corpse for a lifetime, which is a great tragedy of seclusion. This declining southern town is an elegy as well as the epitome of a society in the southern United States that is unacceptable for change.

The novel "*A Rose for Emily*" is set in the famous Jefferson town of Yoknapatawpha in Faulkner's novel. It creates an image of a weird, depressed and deformed woman living in the southern United States. Miss Millie is an eccentric woman unwilling to accept changes in the world. As a descendant of the declining nobles in the South, Emily has stubbornly adhered to the dignity peculiar to the nobles. She refused to pay taxes and install house numbers, being so apathetic when the police came home. From the lines in this work, we can deeply understand Emily's character that she was conservative, perverted, mentally abnormal and isolated from the world (Zhao, 2007, p. 1). Strictly speaking, the Gothic elements in this novel are not a purpose, but a means. Faulkner is not writing a Gothic novel, but to use his unique artistic effects to serve his creation and to serve his exploration of the history of the South, the development and disintegration of the old system of the South as well as the recollection of the old traditional culture and concepts in the South to show how the shadows of the past era control the fate of the wandering people who adhere to the old South tradition in modern society.

2. Visual Sense—Ghostly and Horrible Environment

In Gothic-style novels, people often find that the environment in which the story takes place is in the wilderness, the castle or the ruins. The ruins of Gothic architecture generate multiple interrelated emotions by representing the inevitable decline and collapse of human creation. This unique environment plays a vital role in Gothic novels because it not only creates a dark and horrifying atmosphere for the occurrence of the story and the tragic experiences of the characters but also shows the reader a scene of mental decadence. Faulkner once called "*A Rose for Emily*" a "ghost story" (1956, p. 23). From that, it can be seen that in his mind, this novel is a typical Gothic novel. On one hand, it is the outdated buildings or manors that make readers fear. More importantly, the atmosphere created by the description of the external and internal environment enables readers to experience gloom, mystery and horror everywhere.

Miss Emily's funeral is designed as the beginning of the short story "*A Rose for Emily*". He uses refined space and a series of mysterious sentences to create a kind of dark depression and horror effects that are

common in Gothic novels so as to cause psychological pressure on readers by rendering the surrounding environment. This depression, while constantly stimulating the reader's nerves, also generates a strong desire to attract the reader to further find out more (Zhao, 2007, p. 3). For example, "WHEN Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years" (Faulkner, 2013, p. 229). This opening sets a gloomy tone for the novel and creates a terrifying and mysterious atmosphere. And such a gloomy and solemn funeral not only attracts the locals to want to see the internal conditions of her house but also makes the reader take a sigh of relief—death is always frightening. At the same time, the readers are curious to know: who was Miss Emily? How did Emily die? What did she experience? The author skillfully designed such a Gothic-style and mysterious primer, leaving us with enormous suspense.

Secondly, Gothic literature is closely related to the Gothic Revival architecture of the same era. In a clear and rational way similar to the neoclassical style that the Gothic Revivalists rejected enlightened construction, Literary Gothic embodies the pleasure of extreme emotion, the thrill of fear and awe inherent in the sublime, and the pursuit atmosphere. In this novel, Faulkner also sketched out Emily's ancient house for us. "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 neighbourhood; 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" (p. 229). The story "*A Rose for Emily*" takes place in a small town, where the house is Gothic in style, but the location is not in the wild, which usually fits into an American-style Gothic environment. First of all, from the outside, Emily's giant house looks like a horrible tomb and is full of mystery. Emily lives in a large house built of wood, painted white and boxy. This makes readers deeply feel that this house is particularly like a grave and can imagine how depressing it is to live in it. Meanwhile, the house is rarely visited and no news is heard from the male servant, which makes readers as curious as to other town residents.

Besides, the description of the internal environment of Emily's mansion also renders us a horrifying sense. When Miss Emily refused to pay taxes to the town, the mayor sent a delegation to lobby her. When the delegation came to Miss Emily's house, they found that the light in the room was extremely dim, becoming even darker from the corridor. There was a dusty smell inside the room and the air was humid and impermeable. Although she didn't live in the towering minaret, the dim light and moist moldy smell made them unable to breathe. Such a description undoubtedly creates a decadent, decaying, gloomy, and horrifying atmosphere for the occurrence of the story and fully reflects the characteristics of American Gothic-style novels (Qi, 2007, p. 12). At the same time, readers can also deeply feel that such an environment must have a huge impact on the fate of Miss Emily in her life. On the one hand, after the end of the American Civil War, the economic decline of the southern plantations caused Miss Emily's family, who was originally wealthy, to fall. On the other hand, the oppression and restraint of the old system of the southern society made a woman who was originally noble and respectful become decadent and radical eventually, which is exactly a typical female image in Gothic novels.

Against this background, Miss Emily has jumped into our vision in such a desolate and gloomy environment, from which we can also sketch out the heroine's character and habits. In the Gothic environment of the American South, the Gothic style gradually brings characters into the heart of the readers in order to eliminate their fear, depression, struggle and contradiction (Zhang, 2015, p. 20). Miss Emily lived in a small, dark room all year round and never went out of the house. She only had contact with a black manservant and lost almost all the connection with the outside world. This old house was so shabby and gloomy, like a huge coffin. We can imagine that the protagonist living inside is also terrible. Due to the long-term isolation, just

Emily's appearance makes readers take a long breath of coldness: her short frame gives us a feeling of bloated and enlarged. She looks like a dead body soaked in dead water for a long time, swollen and whitish. With eyes like briquettes, faces like stiff dough, the image of the walking dead is dramatically and vividly shown to readers. This goes well with the old ghost-like house. This gloomy, horrible and mysterious atmosphere inevitably makes readers gasp deeply. Although readers do not understand the general story, a creepy picture appears before them.

3. Physical Sense —The Tone of Death

Gothic-style novels are famous for their horror. For humans, nothing can be more fearful than death. Beginning with the first Gothic novel, *Castle of Otranto*, although Gothic novels have changed a lot in the past two hundred years, death is still one of the most typical themes. That is not only because people are curious about death due to the lack of the cognition of death, but also because of the natural fear and taboo of death. As one of the famous southern writers in the United States, Faulkner also firmly grasps the theme of death in his Gothic novels, reflecting the plight of modern people's lives. In his most iconic Gothic novel, *A Rose for Emily*, although there are only over seven thousand words in the novel, Faulkner describes the death of three characters in succession: the death of Emily's father, the murder of Barron and the natural end of Emily's life. The story begins and ends with a funeral, and throughout death is the theme.

At the beginning of the story, Emily's father has been dead for many years and everything about him comes from the memories of the town's residents. Besides, there is no more detailed description of him. For Faulkner, Emily's father's life is far less important than his death, because his death has historical meaning. During his lifetime, he was the protector of Emily. On the surface, he wants to protect his daughter from harm, but in fact he wants to protect the old tradition and the old system. However, with the development of history, the main system of the southern noble plantation eventually declined. Therefore, the death of Emily's father symbolized the decline of the ancient southern prosperity. However, as a typical Gothic novel, Emily's father's death is the "ghost" (Sun, 2016, p. 180) that has accompanied Emily throughout the story, which has further highlighted the novel's horror atmosphere.

Faulkner also describes Homer's death. Homer is a young man from the northern United States but suddenly disappears in the town. The most shocking thing is that this northerner was murdered by his lover, Emily, an elegant lady of the South. Barron, who died of poisoning, is a victim of the conflict between the old and the new systems of the North and the South. These two social contradictions cannot be reconciled by individual power. Barron is from the north of developed capitalism, representing a new bourgeois force of the machine. He is free-thinking and cynical, who regards marriage as a child's play, "because Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club that—he was not a marrying man" (p. 234). Therefore, due to Barron's attraction, Emily (noble and proud and self-respecting) was going to marry this northern worker who got "daily wages" regardless of condescension, but Barron abandoned her. When Emily's concessions and compromises were fruitless, she poisoned Barron with arsenic out of hatred. Such an abnormal, cruel and extremely perverted tragedy was beyond our expectations.

Finally, the novel also describes the death of Miss Emily. When she was young, she was controlled by her father and had no right to determine her own happiness. After her father's death, except for a black slave, Emily lived alone in a gloomy and damp house. She killed Homer in order to maintain the love in her heart and slept with his body for decades. And she often wore black clothes. In the Western tradition, Emily was like a dead person after killing Homer, being lifeless and like the walking dead. Therefore, the tragedy of Emily is the tragedy of the entire southern society. Although the old system has declined, its impact is still deeply entrenched.

Especially the southern plantation owners are reluctant to give up their aristocratic status and at the same time, their humanity was severely damaged under its influence. Emily's death is a natural death, which represents the curtain-off of the most thriving and prosperous period in the entire South; Apparently, the end of Emily's life seems to be a happy ending, but she has spent a conservative, stubborn, perverted, deformed life. She keeps the ramifications of the old traditions of the South in her whole life, unwilling to accept the institutional treaties of modern society. Ultimately, she could not escape the tragic life that was overwhelmed by the progress of history, which symbolizes the collapse of the old system of the South; Emily's abnormal and deformed love prompts her to eventually poison Barron in hopes of being with her forever. After 40 years with her lover's dead body, she died and collapsed as a monument, which signifies the complete extinction and disappearance of the ancient traditions, values, and lifestyles of the South.

Death also reflects the author's view of time in the novel. The beautiful past taken away by Emily's death, the uncertain present retained by Barron's death and the unanticipated future shown by Emily's death have all proved that time is invincible (Qi, 2007, p. 6).

To sum up, American Gothic novels combined with the historical background and development of the United States, and then have formed their own unique features on the basis of continuing the main characteristics of British Gothic novels. By analyzing the three characteristics of the spooky and horrifying atmosphere in Faulkner's short novel "*A Rose for Emily*", weird-looking demonic characters and the theme of the novel surrounding death, the main features of American Gothic-style novels are suddenly on paper. At the same time, it has deeply exposed and criticized the old traditions, the evils of the old system and the cruel persecution of human nature through these three aspects.

4. Spiritual Sense—Uncanny Character Images

Characters are very important in the American Gothic style, most of which is abnormal and deformed. That is because only such characters can break the traditional reading mode and indirectly expose the decline of society and the degradation of human nature. Besides, the element of fear is a typical characteristic of American Gothic literature, which is usually related to unknown things and can be seen throughout the entire novel. This can also be related to the sense of despair that the characters in the novel have been overcome, and may cause the character to commit heinous crimes. Faulkner has shaped many Gothic characters in his works, including Miss Emily. She is a victim of the distortion of human nature under the old system of southern society and she also commits unforgivable crimes under the influence of the old system. The strange and demon-like images in this small book allow readers to feel the evil in the soul of the characters and the destruction of human nature in the old system of southern society.

First of all, the tragedy of Miss Emily—the declining noble of the South fully reflects the tragedy of the entire southern society at that time. Although her father was a deceased aristocrat, he still adhered to the old values and restricted Emily's marriage by all means so that she could not marry until she was thirty. In addition, her behaviour is different from ordinary people. She has lived a secluded life and never had contact with the outside world, which shows that she is a lonely southern woman. When she was determined to let go of her hierarchy and try to fall in love with a civilian from the North, she was suppressed by the old ideas represented by her father and could not taste the sweetness of love. After her father died, she was finally free to decide her love, but unfortunately, she met Homer who didn't really love her. But Emily had a deep affection for him. In order to retain her beloved, she even used Hoarfrost to poison Homer, thereby keeping her lover by her side forever. In the end, Homer's body was found in an upstairs room in the courtyard. No one had been in this room for more than 40 years, except Emily. There were obvious signs of being crushed on the body and on the pillow beside him, and there was even a long iron-grey hair on it. It can be seen that Miss Emily cherishes this corpse

very much and sleeps with it every night. She is like a devil, chilling people to the marrow. This demon-like behaviour of Emily is a typical characteristic of American Gothic novels, which fully reflects the weirdness of this Gothic character and the tragic fate of the persecution of the old system in the south (Qi, 2007, p. 12)

In addition, Miss Emily, the heroine in the novel, has a much-distorted personality. The text says: “Thus she passed from generation to generation dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (p. 236). Emily is a person with a strong patriotic complex. After her father died, she refused to bury the body and did not even acknowledge her father's death. Her father with aristocratic ancestry drove away every man who came to express his affection to her daughter with a dancing stick, and she had to accept the tragic fate of being an old virgin. Because of Emily's simple and crude interference and obstruction, Emily has developed a unique perverted personality. As her father is her spiritual pillar, she crazily infatuates and worships him. Emily's dependence on her father is due to the lack of maternal love, her father's bossy control and her attachment to her father. Barron's body is exactly a portrayal of her patriarchal complex.

In addition, the novel introduces the residents of the town, who behave weirdly like Miss Emily and the silent black slave. They live in the southern United States and have always been influenced by traditional southern values. However, after the American Civil War, the old social system in the South gradually declined and the industrial civilization of the north was invaded. These changes have caused the town's residents to lose their traditional beliefs, while at the same time they didn't find a new direction. On the one hand, they are the protectors of the old system in the south and look down on the northerners while being awed by the aristocracy. When Miss Emily started dating Homer, they were glad to see her become happy. But when they discovered that they might get married, they began to prevent the union of the two because a noble could not marry an ordinary person in the values of the southern United States. On the other hand, they are full of contempt for the aristocracy. But to some extent, they want to accept the northern lifestyle and try to challenge the authority of the aristocracy, especially the new generation of young people in the southern United States. When Miss Emily refused to pay taxes, the mayor and the Senate, composed of an enlightened second generation, sent Miss Emily a tax notice. They encouraged the use of cotton gins and gasoline pumps as a symbol of northern industrial civilization. They saw Miss Emily's old home as a nail in the eye. When Miss Emily was still unmarried at the age of thirty, they comment on it freely. When Homer first came to town, they liked him very much. But when they saw that Homer was close to Miss Emily, they were quite uncomfortable. It can be seen that the residents of the town are also a group of cruel, weird, and distorted people. They have never really cared for the isolated and helpless Emily, but just waited to see her scandal. The weird behaviour of these residents reveals their distorted humanity under the mutilation of the old system and traditions of southern society, particularly adding to the horror of this Gothic-style novel.

In the description of many people in "*A Rose for Emily*", there is still one who can clearly reflect the uniqueness of the Gothic-style narrative method. That is the black servant who has been with Emily for decades—Toby. Throughout the text, Faulkner's description of the manservant always flashed like a gossamer from time to time, with each description limited to just a few sentences. The reader knows almost nothing about him other than his name. His main job in the novel is to open the door for visitors, lead visitors around and buy items for Miss Emily. Although the black slave appears many times in the novel, he never says a word. It seems that this character is insignificant and dispensable, but his existence is like a ghost, lingering in each chapter of the whole novel; he is also like the indelible shadow, shrouding in every corner of the ancient house and appearing from time to time. By describing the weirdness of the black slave, readers can deeply feel that he is like a ghost wandering in the courtyard, adding a mysterious aura to the novel. He seems to have played little role in the development of the storyline, but Faulkner mentions him in many places, such as:

“which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years” (p.

229).

“They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow” (p. 230).

“and the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man—a young man then—going in and out with a market basket” (p. 231).

“A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening” (p. 235).

“Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket” (p. 236).

“We did not even know she was sick; we had long since given up trying to get any information from the Negro He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse” (p. 236).

“and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again” (p. 237).

And this old man-servant is the only one who has been in contact with Emily for more than ten years, but there seems to be no communication between the two of them. Faulkner really takes the time to cleverly set suspense here. We can't help but wonder: what kind of character was he? Why did he disappear? Where did he go again? What connection did he have with Emily? As a black male servant, Toby has only silence and obedience. He has no sense of existence and even no one sees him. But after Emily's father died, Toby tolerated the insane and arrogant mistress, served and accompanied her without complaint, consistently guarded the terrible secrets, and faithfully defended her image as a model of a southern lady. Toby strongly maintains the monument during the slavery period—the noble Miss Emily, the shape of whom reflects that Emily is a slave to patriarchal society and southern tradition (Qi, 2007, p. 23)

Conclusion

By interpreting the Gothic style of the novel "A Rose for Emily" from different angles, we feel Faulkner's "Southern Complex". As Faulkner himself once said, "I love the South and hate it. There are things here that I don't like at all, but I was born here. This is my home. From this, I am willing to continue to maintain it even with hatred (Shi, 1990, p. 16)". Through this rose, the author has revealed the Southerners' secret love and hate of the South and their nostalgic emotions. The Gothic features and methods have made the novel "A Rose for Emily" produce a captivating artistic charm that will not fade with the change of the times. Gothic style enables us to see through the world we live in from a very unique perspective, to analyze and to express the gloomy, painful and empty emotional world by the visual, physical and spiritual senses it conveys to us. Like a rose carved in marble, it has eternal memory.

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