

Analysis on A Rose for Emily from Foucault's Power and Discourse Theory

Shujing Fu

Communication University of China, Beijing 100024, China.

Abstract: A Rose for Emily, one short tragic story written by William Faulkner, represents us a typical character of southern aristocratic woman. Throughout the whole passage, her voice is scarcely heard by the readers so the image of Emily is always covered by a sense of mystery. To better understand the causing of Emily's tragic fate, this thesis chooses to analyze the short story from the perspective of Foucault's Power and Discourse Theory by interpreting how power and discourse mutually influence each other in Emily's life and in turn how this grotesque figure resist these compelling power inflicted by her living environment.

Keywords: Emily; Power and Discourse Theory; Resist

1. Introduction

William Faulkner, being regarded as one of the most brilliant American southern modern writers, has created a lot of impressive southern figures. Among them, Emily Grierson, the protagonist in his first published short story A Rose for Emily, is a typical south woman character. On the one hand, the story describes how a upper class woman gradually become demented under the toxic upbringing of her father and the harsh judgement of her town's people. On the other hand, it represents us a horrible love story of Emily, who cruelly resists her fruitless love by killing her lover to hold on him. The grievous life of Emily is full of oppression and rebellion, which the external power is so overwhelming that eventually engulf her mentality, leaving readers into deep consideration about the hard consequence of ubiquitous power in everyone's life.

In the 20th century, French philosopher Michel Foucault redefined the meaning of discourse from the perspective of sociology. In his view, there is an invisible power net hiding behind our discourse selection and "the relations of power cannot themselves be established, accumulation, circulation consolidated or implemented without the production, and functioning of a discourse(Foucault, 1979, 74)". That is to say that power is generated by discourse and in turn it influences the effects of discourse. Therefore, power and discourse are mutually depended, once one of them emerges, another will appear simultaneously. Foucault also noticed that where there is oppression inflicted by power, resistance also exists. He encouraged people to reject the rigid surveillance of power and achieve personal subjectivity. Hence, the Power and Discourse Theory is well served for the disadvantaged group in the particular society. By applying Foucault's Power and Discourse Theory into the analysis of A Rose for Emily, this thesis tries to discover the reasons causing the tragic life of Emily. Since her voice has long been muted and external power is inflicted everywhere in her suffering life, it's difficult to understand the motive of her behaviors. Such question gives meaning to this thesis and hope it could be helpful in further understanding the characteristics of Emily.

2. Power Manipulated by Old Southern Society

The story of Emily is set in the American southern society, which due to amount work of plantation and agricultural development is divided into a hierarchical pyramid, where wealthy white farmers take up the top positions, middle-class white is in the middle and black people are arranged in the bottom. The commanding rulers take control of the most social powers and only their discourses embrace forces to limit inferior masses. They become the model of society, "enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy(Foucault, 1981, 3)." Cultivated by such general mood of society, Emily, the daughter of old nobility, is treated as "a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town(Faulkner, 1990, 6)." For Emily, there are mainly two kinds of power permeating in her life, one comes from

her father, the other comes from her town's people.

"Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horse whip(Faulkner, 1990, 10)." The painting is a totally exhibition of patriarchy. Young Emily, born in a declining nobility, has long endured the patriarchal dominance from her father, who not only raises her daughter as a obedient doll, but also robs her possible marriage, as the old aristocrat holds too high about their social position to find a man well matched with Emily. Under the governance of Grierson, Emily unconsciously becomes an idol of southern woman and voluntarily abides these rigid restrictions as a lady. The loveless family deprives her subjectivity about independent thinking, causing the poor lady could not get rid of the oppression of such power even after the death of his father, "as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her women's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die(Faulkner, 1990, 15)." Therefore, the early life of Emily is fully controlled by her father, knowing nothing about freedom and independence.

"Poor Emily(Faulkner, 1990, 16)." The judgement from town's people has been repeated several times in the story, also showing how these prejudicial comments crumble the sensibility of Emily. After the death of Emily's father, the town's people take over their responsibility to continue parenting Emily. Their judging voice floods everywhere in Emily's life, her gradually plumping figure, her emotional life, even the smell of her house. As they become the new ruling power and the more obstinate defenders of conventional social principles, any suggestion of transgression will be harshly criticized. Thus, Emily is totally marginalized by her society and most of her remaining time she isolates herself in a dim and desolate house, unwanted and alone, "like the carven torso of an idol in a niche(Faulkner, 1990, 18)," being gazed from generation to generation. She is outnumbered by her town, the leading power and the insurmountable force. The toxic prejudice towards Emily is so agonizing that she finally lost her mind, causing the inevitably fallen destiny of her tragic life.

3. Discourse Deprived from Emily

The ambiguity of characteristics of Emily also relates to the fact that there is little speech about Emily, as discourse is the most direct way in acknowledge the dispositions of a character. While in *A Rose for Emily*, the only trace we could find is from the distant observance of narrator and the comments of town's people. They embrace power to explain what they regard as truth while in fact, it is also them who make Emily a vulnerable victim by depriving her rights to speak. Each generation of the town, before or after the Civil War, labels Emily as an incarnation of tradition so she ought to practice what the tradition has preached. By putting their hands on everything in Emily's life, the woman finally gives up all sovereignty and never speak for herself.

Firstly, the old generation of the town deprives Emily's discourse in love. When she was still young, her father drove away all courtships, claiming that no men in the town could match with their noble identity. After the death of her father, the old southerners took over the character of father and forbade this highbrow lady involving in any improper affair to guard the dignity of convention. They extinguish any sparks of humiliation and "even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige--without calling it noblesse oblige(Faulkner, 1990,17)." When Emily fell in love with Homer Barren, a day labor, they banded together to sabotage this boldness, by public denouncing, by private reproaching, even by calling for her remote kinsfolk. As the powerful majority, their discourse become the criterion for judging either right or wrong, depriving Emily's freedom in searching for her love.

Then, it is the new generation that put Emily's discourse into nonsense. After the ending if the Civil War, great changes had taken place in this southern town and new ways of life substituted the old one. With all people following the steps of time, only Emily remained as an old monumental and shut herself from the outside. She was an outcast of society and was treated as madness, therefore, all her speeches were meaningless as one way to remove the power of discourse is when it comes from the madness. People always automatically regards the discourse of madness as the contradiction of truth and without truth it is impossible to obtain power as power only exists in truth(Foucault, 1972, 74). When the new generation begun to undertake the duty of taking care of Emily, the doors of Emily had closed for good, she never showed up in any occasion until her death. People believed this old lady had already gone mad when her only lover was drove away, so it is no use to care what a lunatic had expressed. They took away the possibility of Emily's self-explanation but interpret mental activities of Emily from their ideology, leading to the disappearance of Emily's discourse forever. Thus, understanding what indeed happens to Emily

becomes more difficult.

4. Resistance Represented by Emily

Resistance also plays an important part in Foucault's Power and Discourse Theory and the more complicated the net of power is, the more insistent the resistance is. Foucault divided the resistance into two kinds, one is the short-term resistance, which because of its short duration always ends with fruitless, and the other is the long-term resistance, which by coexisting with oppression, fights against with the certain authorities and denies their granted rights. He also supplemented that only with the long-term resistance power could be counteracted and deconstructed, it is the most effective weapons to oppose the dehumanizing disciplinary.

Being confined in the suffocating southern society, Emily also shows some attempts to break the shackle of rigid rules. She firstly emerged as a new face after her father's death, "her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angles in colored church windows sort of tragic and serene(Faulkner, 1990, 8)." Emily no longer regarded herself as belongings of her father, but followed her own hearts to change the stereotypical image of a noble lady. It is her first steps of resistance. The second step is her ignorance towards the new authority of the town. When this new generation became unsatisfied with her privilege of lifelong tax-free, they tried any efforts to invalid this grant, firstly sending notice, then calling a special meeting, finally visiting Emily by themselves. While such endeavor did nothing effective towards this unyielding woman. "I have no taxes in Jefferson(Faulkner, 1990,4)," the reply of Emily is short and powerful, she would not easily been conquered by their demands, she is now the speaker of herself and fears nothing about confrontation.

The boldest resistance of Emily is her affair with Homer Barren, the so called humiliation of her family and the disrespect of social customs. For the whole life of this fallen woman, she never experiences genuine love. So when she met with a sanguine and capable man, who "whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group(Faulkner, 1990, 8)," Emily could possible develop a sense of being loved. Therefore, she cared nothing about the malicious gossips and continued to meet with her lover, regardless of his color, his social status and all social prejudice. Her female consciousness is completely awakened, helping her abundant all ethical burden she had born for so long time.

While the resistance of Emily didn't bring a positive ends, it is only a temporary try and collapses at the first blow. This is also the most essential reason of her tragic fates. When the town's people called her kinship to snuff this disgraceful love, Homer succumbed to these mighty power and disappeared, leaving Emily alone to face the judgement. The last straw of Emily takes away the final hope of Emily's life, driving her to give up her searching for love and never trust there is true love existing in this secular world. The harsh reality teaches the hardest lesson to Emily and causes her mental break down. Thus, she killed Homer, ruthlessly and horribly, it is the only way and the easiest way she could keep the loved-one around. The resistance of Emily also ends, she loses her very little remained confidence and strength to consistently rebel against the power. The short-term resistance finally surrender to the powerful oppression.

5. Conclusion

The tragic life of Emily, according to our above analysis, is mainly caused by three reasons. First is the oppressive control of patriarchal society, which traps her whole life into a model of tradition, thwarting her anticipation towards a normal married life. Second is the all pervading surveillance from the corrosive town. The watching eyes from Jefferson town have never stopped inflicting their poisonous ideology on Emily's life, corroding the self-thinking of Emily into a free man. Her short-term resistance should also takes blame for her tragedy. After being abandoned by Homer, her last faith in human has been deprived and she becomes a true psychopath and poisons her lover. Emily's experience calls for the independence of oppression, it reveals the misconduct of power centralism and tells people only through constant resistance can they get rid of the confinement and hold the string of life in their own hands.

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