

Tragic Beauty of Faulkner's Villain Characters

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This paper applies the theory of "Sphinx Factor" to examine the characters such as Sutpen, Emily and Jason in Faulkner's fiction who are filled with brutal elements. It is found that although these characters are generally considered evil, cruel and violent, they also possess tragic beauty.

Keywords: tragic beauty, bestial elements, Sphinx Factor, Faulkner's fiction, Ethics

Introduction

William Faulkner (1897-1962) is one of the greatest novelists and short-story writers in American literature. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, and is best known for novels such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom! Absalom!* and short stories such as "A Rose for Emily". In these works, he exposes evil phenomena of the society and attacks the evils in his characters. Some critics have attempted to argue for these characters from the perspective of ethical criticism. For instance, J. T. Irwin, in *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*, studies incest and revenge in Faulkner's novels. Jay Parini, in *One Matchless Time: A Life of William Faulkner*, analyzes Faulkner's family ethics. Wang Gang explores the imbalance of family ethics (Wang, 110). However, Faulkner's characters are often complex, difficult to be generalized from a single perspective. To the author's best knowledge, few scholars have attempted to analyze his characters by employing the theory of Sphinx factor, nor have they discussed the Sphinx factor from tragic aesthetics. It is with this in mind that the author of this paper attempts to study the complexity and multifaceted nature of Faulkner's characters by using the theory of Sphinx factor.

Nie's Literary Ethical Criticism

Professor Nie Zhenzhao proposes literary ethical criticism in the early 21st century. Some scholars have used his Sphinx factor to analyze emotions and morality of literary characters from the perspectives of human and beast factors. Nie contends that we are a combination of human and beast factors. The "Sphinx factor" consists of the human factor and the beast factor, which are organically combined to form a complete person (Nie, 2014, p. 38). In general, the human factor is praised while the beast factor is attacked. It seems that there is no exception. However, as both the human and beast factors constitute a person and are integral parts of an individual, we should examine their respective values with a neutral perspective rather than favoring one over the other.

According to Nie, the beast factor is also known as the animal factor, representing instinct and free will, while the human factor is synonymous with rationality. The human factor is considered superior, whereas the

beast factor is deemed inferior (Nie, 2014, p. 38). Some individuals possess more of the human factor, while others have a greater amount of the beast factor. The beast factor is part of a person's animalistic instincts. It is a remnant of animal instincts of the evolutionary process and represents the bestial aspect within humans, driven by primal desires. Its external manifestation is seen in natural and free will (Nie, 2014, p. 39). "If the subject relinquishes their free will and submits to the inevitable dictates of reason, they cannot enter the tragic movement of self-completion but instead lose the tragic spirit of humanity in the drama of self-preservation" (Xiang, 2003, p. 22). In a certain sense, many of Faulkner's characters embody this kind of tragic beauty.

Sutpen, Miss Emily and Jason: Three "Villain Characters"

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the protagonist Sutpen is seen by most critics as a villain (Xiao, 1992, p. 77). Few critics have noticed his pioneering spirit as a Southern plantation owner. After failing in his first attempts to make his grand design come true, he traveled alone to the West Indies, married a plantation owner's daughter, and had a son. Upon discovering that she has some negro blood, he abandoned her and the child, and left the plantation, embarking on a relentless struggle against others and his own fate.

When he proposed to Ellen, daughter of Mr. Coldfield who is a local dignitary, the entire town was against him; some wanted to have him arrested while others were eager to see him make a fool of himself. At the wedding Sutpen faced the community members who "sat on their horses and waited for him. ... they sat there and thought about those two pistols" (Faulkner, 1936, p. 35). He faced them all single-handedly, and with sheer determination, married Ellen and established his Sutpen Hundred. Although the Sutpen dynasty collapsed in the end, his relentless spirit of determination and courage add a touch of tragic beauty to his failure and downfall.

In "A Rose for Emily", although Miss Emily does not narrate her own story, she is described as proud, resolved and determined to do things in her own way, and to get what she wants. Years after her father's death, the community representatives of the next generation "with its more modern ideas" (Faulkner, 1993, p. 48) come to collect taxes. Miss Emily confronts and vanquishes them all with her dry and cold voice:

"I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

"But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff ... I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see. We must go by the—"

"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But Miss Emily—"

"See Colonel Sartoris." (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobe!" The Negro appeared. "Show these gentlemen out." (Faulkner, 1993, p. 48)

Although she is small in frame and in her 60s, Miss Emily delivers her speech defiantly with assertive and commanding interruptions, which dwarfs the community representatives. When she commands the Negro servant to show the tax collectors their way, they can do nothing but to comply.

In another scene where Miss Emily buys the poison, she shows her determination perhaps more than anywhere else:

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eye-sockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look. "I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd recom—"

"I want the best you have. I don't care what kind."

The druggist named several. "They'll kill anything up to an elephant. But what you want is—"

"Arsenic," Miss Emily said. "Is that a good one?"

"Is . . . arsenic? Yes, ma'am. But what you want—"

"I want arsenic."

The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. "Why, of course," the druggist said. "If that's what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."

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. (Faulkner, 1993, p. 51)

As arsenic is a highly toxic poison, it needs prescriptions by law. The druggist is taken aback by what she asks for and tries several times to suggest some alternative substances. But Miss Emily is determined to get the most lethal poison available. Coupled with Miss Emily's intense gaze and unwavering demeanor, the dialogue, especially her assertive interruptions, enables her to be in the upper-hand position, leaving no chance for the druggist to finish what he has to say, but to comply with her demand.

Miss Emily's resolve is also shown through her dating Homer Barron, a foreman from the North. The townspeople interfere with their relationship, but she goes in her way. After the work in the town has finished, Homer "disserts" her. In order to keep him, she poisons him and sleeps with his corpse.

Although Miss Emily, influenced by her primal instincts, has engaged in some absurd and terrifying activities, she embodies the beauty of tragic heroes who pursue what she wants vigorously against all odds. Her doomed struggle against the Southern society that suppresses human nature epitomizes the beauty of tragedy. This is probably why Faulkner entitled the story "A Rose for Emily".

Jason in *The Sound and the Fury* is greedy and abusive. He is generally considered as a villain, one of the most despicable characters in literary works. Even Faulkner himself says that he is "the most vicious character . . . I ever thought of" (Meriwether & Millgate, 1980, p. 146). Dilsey, the black servant of the Compson family, says: "you's a cold man, Jason, if man you is" (Faulkner, 1964, p. 187). And Caddy says that "you never had a drop of warm blood in you" (Faulkner, 1964, p. 188).

Although he represents the primal instincts and resorts to any means to achieve his goals, Jason's relentless determination to get what he wants embodies certain tragic beauty. He lost his father's affection even when he was young, and he does not have the opportunity to attend college like his brother Quentin does. He has to work to feed the whole family. He has to resort to every means at his disposal to rise above others. Having examined Jason from different perspectives, we realize the other side of him: he is also a man of strong determination and a man with tragic beauty. He himself is a pitiable victim, and his struggle itself is filled with tragedy. He is a character full of contradictions, and he should not be simply classified as a villain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the characters in Faulkner's fiction are filled with contradictions and cannot be simply categorized as either good or bad in the traditional sense. It is true that characters such as Sutpen, Miss Emily and

Jason are villains, but they have been treated unfairly by the society and fate. They fight against the odds, and they also possess some beauty although it is tragic.

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