

An Analysis of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" in the Perspective of Aristotle's Definition on Tragedy

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Abstract

The present paper is a detailed analysis of William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" in the perspective of Aristotle's definition on tragedy. Through the analysis, readers can better understand the tragic characteristics of this classic novel and Aristotle's definition on tragedy.

Keywords

A Rose for Emily, tragedy, definition.

1. Introduction

Aristotle in his "Poetics" presents the most influential definition on tragedy. In the sixth chapter of the Poetics, Aristotle puts it this way: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament... in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."

William Faulkner's best-known short story in most aspects well fits Aristotle's definition on tragedy despite being a non-traditional modern novel. By analyzing Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" in the light of Aristotle's tragedy theory, readers can better understand the tragic characteristics of this classic novel and Aristotle's definition on tragedy.

2. Text Body

First of all, by "a certain magnitude", Aristotle refers to the seriousness and importance of a tragedy. There must be a convincing chain of events to change a given situation from good to bad fortune. Obviously, "A Rose for Emily" has a serious theme, intending to objectively reveal the deteriorating aristocracy in the South in America and the respect and grace the last generation struggles to maintain. Instead of stuffing the story with trivial matters which characterize postmodern novels, Faulkner talks about life and death in the short story, from which we can witness the ups and downs of the southern aristocrats.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is not life itself; it is life imitated on a stage. Therefore, the heroine and the plot of Faulkner's short story may have a stereotype, but the characters are sure to have been modified a lot or even exaggerated, and the plot is usually more complicated than what is truly happening in reality. Faulkner is more likely to select incidents and details that highlight Emily's character and avoid the trivial matters of everyday life. Details like Snow White arranging and cleaning the books in Donald Barthelme's postmodern works will never occur in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily". All the details here are of great importance or of "a certain magnitude".

For Aristotle, tragedy is not merely a revelation of character, but an imitation of an action, although character is expressed through action. Thus he regards the plot, "the structure of the incidents," as the most important part of a tragedy by saying that "the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the story will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what has taken place." The emphasis on "action" and "plot" can be vividly

shown in five parts in "A Rose for Emily", namely, Emily's refusal to pay taxes in Jefferson, Emily's refusal to get rid of the disgusting smell and the death of her father, Emily's romance with Homer Barren and her purchase of poison, Emily's old life and Emily's funeral and the discovery of Homer Barren's dead body. The tragic effect cannot be fully achieved with the absence of any of the "actions" and "plots". Emily's character and temper can never become self-evident; rather, it is thoroughly revealed through her actions and the plot.

According to Aristotle, the plot should be complex. A simple plot moves in a straight line naturally toward an ending, with no surprise and suspense involved. A complex plot which involves "reversal and recognition", however, moves in various directions until truth is revealed in the very end. Reversal is "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite", and recognition is "a change from ignorance to knowledge." These two changes, according to Aristotle, can strengthen the tragic effect of drama. In "A Rose for Emily", when Emily bought poison one day, people in town all thought Emily was going to commit suicide for the splitting up with Homer Barren. Later, people in town realized that the Northerner had abandoned Emily, leaving her heart-broken and all by herself. But in the end "the action veers round to its opposite". People in Jefferson as well as readers discovered the shocking "knowledge": Emily killed her lover and stayed with the corpse for over 40 years.

In Aristotle's views, the tragic figure must be one whose fate would excite feelings of pity and fear in the audience. Neither the fall of an evil man nor that of a man of virtue will create the tragic effect, for the former only pleases the readers' moral sense, and the latter only shocks us. The proper tragic figure is one who is neither evil nor extremely virtuous, one "whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. In Aristotle's era, the proper tragic figure will be a king. In "A Rose for Emily", Emily resembles the king as she is on top of the hierarchy tower in Jefferson town. Emily is by no means an evil woman, nor is she a woman of extreme virtue. Emily's father or even grandfather must have contributed to the development of the town like building a road or something else. As the descendant of the family, Emily is kind in nature, which can also be shown in her willingness to teach kids to draw. She is not a saint either; otherwise she just will not kill her beloved to save her love. As the American South develops, Emily has evolved into an average citizen with a unique social status who is not as comfortably off financially as in the past. Emily intends no harm, and she is just struggling to survive and keep the old tradition of aristocratic respect and grace, so her misfortune is never brought about by vice or depravity. Her tragedy is mainly caused by "error" or "frailty". It is the error of the decayed tradition and the whole society, and her own reluctance to change that leads to her inevitable tragedy.

Aristotle holds that tragedy should be able to arouse "pity and fear through which it accomplishes its catharsis of such emotions". As a tragic figure has the qualities of an average person, and mostly above the average, readers tend to respect the tragic figure rather than devalue him or her. Pity is brought about by the fate the character has suffered, and we fear that what happens to him or her can also happen to us. In general, pity and fear can be brought about in the following way. In a tragic plot, the tragic figure, out of a pure motive, takes action. With the motive intensifying, the situation changes from the favorable to the unfavorable through reversal and recognition, finally leading to the occurrence of disastrous incidents such as killing one's biological father. It is the unhappy ending that arouses the audience's pity and fear. In Faulkner's short novel "A Rose for Emily", the heroine Emily or the equivalent of the main character in a drama, has come down in the world, but she remains a noble, so Emily has similar qualities of an average person but obviously above the average. The author, the readers and town people all show their respect for this tragic figure as is shown in the flowers or roses given by the author and town people. Life seems to be unfair for Emily who has really suffered a lot. She grew in the shadow of her father; her temporary romance faded away with Homer's betrayal; she had to bear the loneliness most of the time. As readers, we feel sympathy for

Emily's misfortune and we possibly also fear our parents' absolute authority, the betrayal of our beloved, and the state of being alone. The plot of the short story is definitely tragic. Emily's motive is simple: to get married to Homer Barren and stay with him forever. She takes action. She shows her affection by decorating the room and buying washing stuff for Homer. Emily's motive of getting married is becoming more and more intense, but Homer's cold and direct refusal changes the situation from the favorable to the unfavorable. Eventually, Emily kills Homer. That is still not the end. The author shocks his readers by the revelation of the fact that Emily has slept with Homer's corpse for many years. In this way, the readers' pity naturally goes to Emily, and they feel that they also have a chance of being betrayed and even killed by someone they are deeply in love with.

3. Conclusion

In summary, despite the non-traditional writing technique and time disorder in story-telling, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" well fits Aristotle's definition on tragedy. The short story is a serious one with a theme of magnitude. Unlike postmodern novels, the details are all delicately and purposefully selected. With a complete and complex plot, the short story is so well-constructed. And with the use of reversal and recognition, the ending really shocks the readers. Readers feel pity for Emily's suffering and misfortune, and also fear they may experience some aspects of what has happened to Emily in the future. Thus, any reader after reading the short story can enjoy its catharsis of its emotions that the story has brought to them.

References

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