An Encounter with Faulkner's Southern Personae

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Abstract. This essay is trying to explore the relationship between American modern novelists. William Faulkner and his culture quality and character of Southernism. Except for the unique individuality of American Deep South, as a descendant of distinguished southern farm-owner, Faulkner has his plentiful and unparalleled understanding towards South. The first part of this essay deals with the thematic explanations of Southernism in Faulkner's works. Using his thematic consistent series of works, Faulkner created a Yoknapatawpha World. Behind the background of Faulkner's family, not only the saga of Satoris, Sutpen, McCullers, Compson and Snopes, but also the southern living scenes of Frenchman's Bend, railways, wild forests are all vividly depicted. Furthermore, using the themaric explanations Faulkner expressed his ambiguous and complicated cultural criticism towards racial discrimination, living conditions of Southern descendants and the history, actuality and future of Deep South.

Born in a family of prestige, William Faulkner lived a life of relative seclusion in the small town of Oxford, Mississippi. As a small child, he absorbed the living history in the tales of aging Civil War veterans, and it seemed the past was always a palpable presence (Hamblin). Like the other forerunners, his great-grandfather became a considerable figure in his time and provincial milieu, and achieved the family prosperity during and right after the Civil War. But his grandfather and father were not able to sustain such family fame and experienced the decline of the social and economic status in the face of the social changes. Compared with his father, Faulkner’s mother had the strong will and self-esteem, and dared to face all the life dilemmas courageously. Therefore, it was such difference between grandfather’s glory and father’s failure, and mother’s persistent influence over him provide impel Faulkner to be a literature master. In his fictions, subconsciously or on purpose, Faulkner used materials of his life in very subtle, often tertiary ways to recount the general fate of those aristocratic families after the Civil War, to illuminate his personal spiritual cries and struggles (Towner). During his adolescence, the South was experiencing the dire poverty, social change, and cultural collision, and the clash between the past and present became the constant problem for the other ever prestigious families. This most troubled period of a spiritually and psychologically turbulent life against the historical background of the collapse of tradition became the primary source of his Yoknapatawpha saga. His characters were typical of the historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South, because they lived in a world shaped and often distorted by violence and depravity, time and family ties. The nobles were no longer noble, but morally corrupt, lived in the memories, had the nature distorted, and finally entombed in history (Hamblin). The women were no longer the fair ladies, but rebellious against the tradition, fell into degeneration and finally invited the self-destruction.
The Civil War, as the dividing line of the South history, brought the South from the glory to doom, and created the odd contradiction of the South. Along with its defeat, the old Deep South died. But it still lived, even more vigorously and stubbornly. On the one hand, the economic foundation had been destroyed, the social structure and moral values of the South aristocrats had collapsed; on the other hand, the dream of the everlasting aristocracy were deeply rooted in their minds, and this illusory dream became their spiritual substitute and shelter of the reality escape. The southerners sunk into sleep and dream, and their mind and reason stagnated. Such spiritual paralysis deprived them of rational minds, thus the Southerners occasionally would behave in an irrational way and cling to the dream of foregone luxury and glory. The disjunction between the reality and illusion stuck firmly in them and made them to be the captive of the past. Their nostalgia could not offer any earthly progress, but had their spirit slaughtered finally. The inhabitants of this small Yoknapatawpha County were a mass of the unfortunate, who were bankrupt, frustrated, lonely, depressed, degenerated and even morbid, and they lost their life direction. Faced with abruptly changed reality, Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Gail Hightower in Light in August exhibited their respective life tragedy.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner depicted a vivid picture of the protagonist’s nostalgia of the ante-bellum society of the South. Quentin’s section evoked a feeling about the past that serves to make the present appear as a waste land, but the past that Faulkner uses to set off the present in the novel is not the past of an earlier society or historical period, but the immediate past—the world of childhood, innocent and idealistic (Volpe). Quentin, the first son of the Compsons, thought his childhood as idealistic and dedicated himself to preserve the glorious traditions. But his inherited traditions had declined, and were contrary to the social development. In addition, father’s influence of nihilism and his weak personality, could not enable him to shoulder such heavy responsibility. His life was doomed to be a tragedy and he would be the sacrifice of the society. When the post-war South was experiencing the huge transformation, Quentin did not feel like to adapt to the social development and change, and he attempted to keep intact his youthful world, to stave off the intrusion of reality (Volpe). He changed the reality to be a platform, on which he performed what he deemed as glorious time and again, regardless of the vain and absurdity of such performance. He felt that his world came to life only when the gear of the clock stopped at the point when the aristocracy prospered, so Quentin kept his adolescent mind in stasis. However, no matter how hard he tried to avoid the passage of time, it appeared as an omniscient phantom eroding his life bit by bit and destroying him finally. Quentin thought the glory of the tradition was the only hope for his life and dared to risk his life to keep it. Therefore, Quentin’s struggle with reality reached its climax when Caddy lost her virginity, which was a symbol of tradition by the social and religious code. He could not protect his sister, stop her degeneration and accept the fact, but would like to admit it as the sin within the family and go to hell with Caddy together. Caddy’s loss of virginity gave Quentin a great shock, destroyed his dream of southern heroism and led to his suicide. When the old tradition passed by, the family declined and his sister degenerated, Quentin’s life had to announce its ending. Quentin’s tragedy lied in his uncritical acceptance of the declining tradition, his indulgence in his romantic dream of heroism, his attempt to stop the social development and South evolution by his own will of power. Faced with the collapse of the traditional values and the chaos of the society, Quentin ended his life to proclaim his loyalty in his deeming refined and romanticized tradition.
In Light in August, Gail Hightower, more obviously than the others, was an evader of life. His birth to an aging couple helped to seal his doom. His father was past fifty when Gail was born, and there was no communication between father and son. His mother spent his formative years in her bed, dying. While the father he knew and feared was a phantom which would never die as same as the reality; the story of his grandfather released him from the terrors of the reality. His grandfather, who was ever a patriotic soldier gallantly defending his land during the Civil War and became Hightower’s idol. Therefore, Hightower’s entire life was devoted to immuring himself safely away from the terrors of the loud harsh world, and lived in the past to refuse to confront the problems of the present. Even during Hightower’s ministry, the townspeople of Jefferson ridiculed him for his recurring themes of his grandfather’s ride in the Civil War in his sermons. Hightower believed that one can repeat the past if one relives certain moments often enough. Inevitably, Hightower became a ghostly relic of the past, separated from the tangible world by an invisible shield of glass (Martin). Such driving and destructive force in Hightower’s life, his obsession with the past and his grandfather turned him into a psychological cripple (Martin). In Hightower’s life, his wife and parishioners were his sole contacts with the world, but he failed to interact with them on a human, personal level, and so long as he remained exposed among them, he was vulnerable. His indifference to the reality drove his wife to seek promiscuous relationships and suicide and himself to be boycotted from his wild, mad sermons by the parishioners. When Hightower was drawn back into the world by Byron and within a few days’ experiences and extremes of joy and pain that the living can provide, he acknowledged human responsibility, in part at least, for the catastrophes which afflict man. He came to the realization that “composite of all the faces which he had ever seen,” his own among them, there is a composite face of victim and executioner (Volpe). Though he admitted that in his own attempt to escape from his fears, he created for others much pain and terror, he could not get his conscience cleared, but even more tormented. The root of his tragedy was the undying spiritual heritage from his grandfather, and predestined him to live in his illusion to afflict the pains for others and himself as well.

In the early eighteenth century, the Southerners began to form their unique South Myth, in which “Southern lady hood” was an important element. The lady was not those who happened to be more affluent than others, but the white woman whose privileged position were essential to her identity and social role. However, the lady as represented in plantation ideology was powerless, though seemingly significant. As a matter of fact, she was excluded from power structure while she was enjoying the affluence and social position brought by her father or husband. She lived under the patriarchy and was confined by the social conventions. The Southern lady had to act as the fair lady and become the South’s Palladium, the goddess Diana, and the Virgin Mary. She was estranged from her own physicality, divorced from the “low” by class norms. She was prohibited from speaking a vernacular of bodily functions from sex to birth to menstruation to defecation. The white Southern culture attempted to efface white woman’s sexual desire by establishing a simple and untroubled code in which females were either ladies or whore or slaves. However, after the Civil War, the Old South had gone with the wind. The post-bellum situation did not fit the existence of “Southern lady hood” any longer. Suffering from the failure of the Civil War, Southerners lived in humiliation and poverty and southern men could no longer support and protect southern women. Family property had been sold, the mansion was collapsing, and the economy went bankrupt. Many of Faulkner’s women, however, even the ones ostensibly most confined by the social system, experienced a sort of
liberation in the crucible of war or severe personal crisis which prompted the discovery and display of qualities, resourcefulness, independence, and even tragic grandeur (Wittenberg). They have to protect and fight for their own future. This was the only way out. They defied the unfairness of the fate with a strong will and tortured heart, and were considered to be fallen. Their suffusion with awakening and rebellion, contradiction and perplexity, despairs and failures, led to their destruction. Some of them went mad, some self-imprisoned and some murderous.

Caddy from *The Sound and the Fury* was born in a noble family. Since childhood, she manifested courage, confidence, and independence, and displayed her rebellious quality. Many factors led to her constant rebellion and final tragedy. According to Quentin, Caddy appeared at times to appropriate the masculine. But this trait in Caddy did not fit the code of the South, which drove her to behave rebelliously against the tradition. To be the daughter of the aristocratic family, she never submitted herself to a submissive role among her brothers. Instead she took the role of the eldest son, sexually assertive, sowing her wild oats while her brothers exhibited timidity. Perhaps what best exhibited Caddy’s rebellious quality was her defiance against the Southern tradition by regarding chastity as completely unimportant. In addition, Caddy had the strong desire for knowledge of human relationships and experiences which her family tried to deny her any part in love, death, sex, evil, suffering, and maturity. She was courageous enough to face change and loss, to escape from the mythical South of the past, and to struggle to pursue her freedom. Another factor which led to Caddy’s rebellion and misfortune is her sympathetic love. Caddy is the only vibrant, warm and loving person in the family. In adolescence, she responded to love and life; later her natural response was twisted into something corrupt by her family. Driven by the sense of guilt they foster in her, she became promiscuous (Volpe). Caddy was not one of the Southern myths, but a woman, who was brave enough to rebel and fight for her own freedom. However, in comparison with the immense confinement and pressure from the conventional gender values, Caddy’s rebellion was too trivial and trifling. Despite many efforts to exert impact over her own fate and over her family fortunes, Caddy was repeatedly thwarted by the overwhelming cultural milieu. When Mrs. Compson carried Caddy off to French Lick to find her a husband, an action that distorted Caddy’s love by emphasizing its sinfulness, she finally gave up, realizing her limit in power, and also for the sake of love. In her marriage to Herbert, she wished that her father would stop worrying about her, Benjy would not be abandoned and sent to madhouse, Jason would be given a banking job, and the family honor would be kept. In a word, she wished that everyone would benefit from her marriage with the only exception of herself. Yet, it was this last act of selfless love that condemned her to an unhappy bereft condition.

Another female character who went even further in rebellion was Temple Drake in *Sanctuary*. She could have been a good person, a girl living a normal and happy life if she was not born in a Puritan family. Her father imposed the old Southern ideal for honor upon her, so she was deprived of the light of making friends with men and enjoying life as a girl. Under the pincers’ attack of the family and society, Temple, the unconventional Southern belle, became even violently rebellious, and defied the masculine values by her experiment in sex. This was because the voice of women was silenced under patriarchal regime, and what was left with her was merely her body. Through her female body, Temple externalized both her contempt for sexist confinements and her defiance against the gender repression. Her weapon was her body. Her means, which was counted to be the most subversive, was to respond openly and hungrily to her sexual desire. By her carnal quality, she upset and
distressed the arrogant males. In doing so, she was to deconstruct the masculine conspiracy to enslave the femininity and to subvert the gendered roles coded by the patriarchy. In this sense, Temple’s unconventional and unrestrained sexual relationship was to be counted as an avenging and rebellious strike back at the distorted social gendered identity. Temple Drake was called a “Venus flytrap”, a “death goddess”, a violator, and a ferocious bitch. Admittedly, Temple was a destructive young woman, responsible directly or indirectly for the death of two men and perhaps for the suicide of Popeye, but it is important to see her as a victim not only of rape, but also of her family and of the society (Wittenberg). There was nothing wrong with her passion, and what went wrong was the absence of genuine and natural love inside the family. It was the unnatural code her family and the society that not only drove her away but also destroyed her humanity.

Summary

At the first glance of the characters of the Yoknapatawpha saga, one might thought them as eccentric and extreme. But to some extent, they reflected the social condition and manifested the inevitable shock on the people living after the Civil War. Faced with the decline of the family economy and status, the collapse of the social traditions and the energetic new era, these characters could not accept the reality, but chose to live in the past or challenge the traditions, and ended up in their self-destruction. After the social structures had been changed, the Southern traditions cannot be simply protected or challenged completely. How to protect and stick to the old tradition in the new era needed more deep thinking. One’s absolute nostalgia cannot help to maintain the traditional values, but may lead to the personal morbidity and become the sacrifice of the dying tradition. Meanwhile, the absolute challenge of the deep-rooted tradition seemed to be more impossible. Though they were dying, the Southern traditions still had their vigorous influence upon the society. When anyone tried to challenge the traditions, the family, the society would all stand in his way to stop his doing. Under such gigantic social force, any individual cannot be powerful enough to defeat the tradition, but only ended up in an unspeakable tragedy. To the southerners, the Old South had become a heavy burden and it was really hard for them to deal with it properly, and there appeared so many tragic characters in Faulkner’s stories.

References


