

The Negative Female Character in the Fiction of William Faulkner (1929-1935)

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Abstract

William Cuthbert Faulkner (1897-1962) is a major American twentieth century novelist who reflects his fascination with woman clearly in his literary production by presenting female characters as central. Faulkner evokes the woman as a child, young, mature and an old one, and also as married or unmarried. He also introduces the black woman as well as the white. Moreover, Faulkner examines his female character from various sides and in relation to morality, race, gender, culture and psychological issues.

This study examines various types of negative female characters and Faulkner's methods of characterization in the following selected texts that were nearly written in the same period (1929-1935): *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), "A Rose for Emily" (1930), "An Odor of Verbena" (1930), "Dry September" (1931), and *Sanctuary* (1931). Finally, there is a conclusion that sums up the major findings of the study.

Key Words: Faulkner, negative, female character, fiction, morality

شخصية الأنثى السلبية في روايات ويليام فولكنر (1929 - 1935)

رياض طالب محمد

مديرية التعليم المهني في النجف الاشراف

المستخلص

وليام كوثبرت فولكنر (1897-1962) من أهم الروائيين الأمريكيين في القرن العشرين، الذي يعكس افتتانه بالمرأة بوضوح في إنتاجه الأدبي بتقديم غالبية الشخصيات المركزية في أعماله من الشخصيات الأنثوية ومعظمها من الشخصيات السلبية. استعرض فولكنر المرأة بوصفها طفلة وشابة وناضج وكبيرة في السن، ومتزوجة أو غير متزوجة. ويقدم المرأة السوداء والبيضاء. علاوة على ذلك يتناول فولكنر الشخصية الأنثوية من مختلف الجوانب فيما يتعلق بالأخلاق والعرق والجنس والثقافة والقضايا النفسية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في أنواع مختلفة من الشخصيات النسائية السلبية التي رسمها فولكنر في النصوص التالية التي كانت مكتوبة في نفس المدة تقريبا (1929-1935): الصوت والغضب (1929)، "وردة ل إيميلي" (1930)، "رائحة فيربينا" (1930)، "سبتمبر الجاف" (1931)، والملاذ (1931). وانتهت الدراسة باستنتاج يلخص النتائج الرئيسية للدراسة.

الكلمات الدالة: فولكنر، سلبية، شخصية أنثوية، خيال، أخلاق.

Women play many roles in life and occupies various positions from a caretaker to a leader, and from a nun to a deceiver. The world, at the turn of the twentieth century which is called the progressive era, particularly America, was going through many changes like: economic growth, social reform, and the World Wars that prompted the roles of many people to change.¹

The roles of American women also changed due to certain significant events in history like Great War and decision of women's right to vote. Now the door is opened for women to get jobs that only men had accomplished before. The existing feminine role in society was noticeably altered.² Such alter had been documented by modern artists in their creation of new female characters to suit the new roles of women in society.³ Those artists, like William Faulkner, are not necessary described as woman champions or misogynist, rather skillful authors who try to mirror the reality of woman's internal as well as external world in objective representation that illustrates her real image in modern era.⁴

Faulkner is a distinctive traditional moralist whose unique style makes other call him "The Literary Carpenter".⁵ In addition, this distinct figure makes out of his region kingdom for his literary world that covered by the deep sense of southernness that occupies the center of his literary production of 1920s and 1930s. These literary pieces grew out of his response to the South's extremity and his attempts to redefine and combine its hierarchical conceptions of race, gender, and class.⁶

Truthfully, Faulkner sufferer and struggles greatly to understand the nature of his Southern conception. He analyzes deeply the slipping of the following: white identity toward black, femininity toward masculinity, the pure toward filthiness, and many others. The slipping from one status to another or from one identity to a new one is evidently reflected in Faulkner's short story "An Odor of Verbena" which is Faulkner's first station in his journey of presenting a negative female character.

Faulkner's "An Odor of Verbena" is a short story whose plot is built round the character of a young Southern man, Baynard Sartoris, who must achieve his filial duty towards his father's sudden murder. Baynard is faced with the South ancient honorary system, which states that as the only or the eldest son must avenge his father's kill. Baynard becomes in conflict between the two options which are reflected by Faulkner's employment of two female characters: Drusilla, Baynard's step-mother and his Aunt Jenny. Both of them try to work on Baynard's emotion and intellect out of their attempt to bend him to their incompatible points of view.

The grieving widow Drusilla who stands for the primary voice of the masculine old Southern honor system, puts Baynard's life at danger as she directs him to revenge. She expects Baynard to challenge her husband's killer with "the long true barrels true as justice".⁷ Actually, Drusilla inflamed Baynard's chance to speak glowingly of revenge and do this heroic action of what so many Southern men are proud. The revenge is proof for his nobility and bravery.⁸ "To be permitted to kill, to be permitted vengeance, to take into your bare hands the fire of heaven that cast down Lucifer"⁹

Drusilla is the only female character who supports the traditional male attitude through her views and style: "the body not slender as women are but as boys are slender... when the mood stuck her, Drusilla would lift her skirts nearly to her knees and run like a boy."¹⁰ In a point of fact, this is not the traditional image of an adult Southern woman who is a wife and step mother, rather the negative female character who evaluates the aspects of honor more than life itself.

Drusilla's plan has been crushed by Aunt Jenny who is more concerned with the senseless revenge. Aunt Jenny struggles hard to convince Baynard not to fall into the same "old honor bound trap of an-eye-for-an-eye".¹¹ She tries to awaken his intellectual power. "He is able to act with his kind of courage because Aunt Jenny reaches his subconscious with the warning that Drusilla... is a symbol of destruction."¹²

Being still in the Southern region and the employment of the image of Southern woman who has a violent nature, no one can ignore the character of Emily Grierson in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily". Faulkner makes Emily more powerful than Drusilla, since Emily does the action of killing by her hand and not being only a motivator. Moreover, Emily is, unlike Drusilla, has more than one face and this makes her a subject for various critics' pens.

In Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", Emily is an alienated spinster living in the South in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. She lives in isolation from her town's people who are wondering what she was doing.

Emily is born to a proud aristocratic family during the Civil War and she used to live with her father and servants in a big ornamented house. Her father considers his family members as superior people whose rank suits non in the town's young people in order to accept him as a suitor for their daughter Emily. She was like her world, turns round her father whose death reflects the effect of such harsh isolation.

The day after[her father] death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief in her face. She told them that her father was not dead.¹⁵

The lines above reveal the negative behavior of Emily who tries to hold on her father, even after his death. It is true it is a moment of loss for Emily who has been left lonely and penniless, but at the same time it is a moment of liberation. So, she tries to change her life, "when we saw her again, her hair was cut short making her look like a girl," and then she finds love with Homer Barron, a certain Northerner who comes as a contractor for paving the side walk of her town. It was known, Barron drank with younger men in the Elks' Club and he remarked that he was not a marrying man.

After that day, Barron has never seen (alive) again. Till the last moment when the town people finally are able to enter the house upon Emily's death. At that moment they

discover the truth about the extent of Emily's dilemma: she has kept the dead body of her lover, Homer locked in a bedroom since the moment of his killing, and she had continued to sleep with him.¹⁶

The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and bidding dust. Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head.¹⁷

The end of the story was the real clue for the critics to analyze the character of Miss Emily. They say that killing Homer is out of her attempt to stop time by confusing past and present. Emily is a Southern woman who still lives under the convention of the past and she is chained by the tradition of the Southern Culture. So it is impossible for this lady to live with a Northerner who is guided by his instinct, false attitudes and immoral values. While other say that Emily loves Homer greatly, so she resists the gossip of the town people and prepares everything for their marriage but she killed him since she discovered that Homer was homosexual person. But those who connected Emily's bloody action with the sense of "Southernness" state that Emily is an allegorical character that symbolizes the American South's inability to move forward along with the industrialized North after the Civil War.¹⁸

To concentrate merely on the bloody action of Emily in relation to her Southernness, Emily really deserves to be considered as a tragic heroine who suffers greatly to achieve her noble aim which is the protection of the tradition of her South Culture, but if this unexpected behaviour of Emily towards the lover connected with her unexpected reaction to her father's death, the analysis will be something else as that of the psychoanalytic critics. They say that Emily is a twisted and mad lady who reaches to such status out of the immense anguish from being alone, isolated and alienated from the outside world. She is over thirty and knows nothing about love, pleasure, happiness or even the meaning of life itself. This opinion is not the sole for the psychoanalytic critics, since there is other group which says that the eccentric reaction of Emily towards her father's death is not a matter of shock out of losing a dear person, rather it is a result of an oedipal complex that Emily suffers from.¹⁹

Moreover, Emily can be also described as a mythic character that mingles between life and death on one hand and reality and illusion on the other hand. It is not easy to believe that a thin, sick, "Her skeleton was small and spare", and penniless woman can kill a young man and keep the corpse at her home for many years and nobody discovered that. This female character which has more than one face is really like a riddle. It has a seasonal nature: sometimes appears as mature old woman while sometimes as a girl, and in certain situations she behaves like an adolescent who has no reasonable conduct. Emily

is a notable negative female character in Faulkner's writing and she is employed skillfully to symbolize the excessive pride, aristocracy, and the voice of southern culture that cannot cope with its death and decay. She also represents the vice of the past generation who cannot accept the new modern life and they are against the movement of dehumanization of modern era. In addition, Emily reflects the human common fear from change. She is just like many people who do not like variances from what they are used to in their lives.²⁰

Emily's attachment to the old convention and her refusal to accept the change is regarded as one of the major principles that create her negative image in the eyes of her town's people. Faulkner introduced another female character who has been judged as a negative woman out of her seeking for the change. This is the state of Minnie Copper in Faulkner's short story, "Dry September", who feels a victim of her gender.²¹

In reality, being sexually attached or attractive is so important to women and this is the need of Minnie Copper. The latter is now thirty-eight or thirty-nine, so she is unable to hold any man's interest. She suffers that "the sitting and lounging men did not even follow her with their eyes anymore".

Minnie feels that if she was of interest to the men of her town, then they would at least look at her when she passes by. But their stopped looking at Minnie makes her feel like even less of a woman. Such a harshness of cruel feeling that is raised within her soul increases more when she thinks of her classmates who are all married and have children while she is not. And what adds more to her misery is that her classmates' children call her "auntie".

No man ever called on her steadily until the children of the other girls had been calling her "aunty" for several years... Then the town began to say: 'Poor Minnie.' 'But she is old enough to take care of herself'.²²

By the passage of time, the social standard of the unmarried woman is lowered. Such feeling of insult and the neglect of society reminds Minnie of her town's view that she is an old maid. Such false idea that is created within Minnie's inner world as well as the external one leads to her negative behavior which indirectly assures her pure womanhood.²³

Minnie Copper is striking back at society by accusing Willie Mayes, Blackman, of raping her. By such behavior, She succeeds to attract the attention to herself since all "the town begin to say, poor Minnie". As a fact, Minnie is a victim of the neglect of her society who no longer valued her femininity. And the only way that left to her to attract the attention, is the cry of "rape".²⁴

Minnie's accusation of Willie Mayer is based upon her own sexual frustration. She feels that her sexual attractiveness is decreased with her growing age. And the cry of rape is a successful plan that reasserts her sexuality and restore the care of her town's

men. "Where even the young men lounging in the door-way tipped their hats and followed with, their eyes the motion of her hips and legs when she passed."²⁵

In brief, Minnie copper feels with false womanhood and looks at herself as a victim of her gender. The false womanhood has also been manipulated to occupy the center of other fictional world, *The Sound and The Fury* whose victim is Caddance (Caddy) Compson.

Actually, acts of rebellion, loss of self-esteem, lack of confidence and many other troubles that modern man faces are the result of bad childhood. And unfortunately, sometimes the society ignores these aspects, but literature is the medium that tries to diagnose the crisis of modern man's life and the ills of the society. William Faulkner is one of those artists who try to achieve such a task in their writing, as in his novel *The Sound and the Fury* that is centered upon the objective representation of the suffering of Caddy.²⁶

Caddy, going through a bad childhood, experiences abuse from her parents which causes her emotional difficulties in adult life. As a matter of fact, Caddy's parents never beat her or sexually molest her, but they hurt her psychologically by the lack of emotional support. None of them says "I love you" to Caddy and they do not show her any type of interest. Caddy's father is booze-drunkard and he has no kindness towards his daughter. Moreover, it is not easy to establish relation between Caddy and her father who considers women as a source of evil as he states that: "Women have an affinity for evil for supplying whatever the evil lacks in itself for drawing it about them instinctively...until the evil has served its purpose whether it existed or no."²⁷

Beside the cruelty of the father, Caddy suffers more from the neglect of the mother. As a fact, the girl needs her mother more than anyone else, Caddy never gets praise, support or love from her mother, orders and unjust blames. Caddy's mother (Caroline) is an egocentric woman who pays no attention neither to husband nor to children. Mrs. Compson replaces her position with Caddy. She asks the little girl who is still in need of care and support to be a caretaker and supporter to her brothers, particularly Benjy who needs much. She just orders Caddy: "You must have done something to him[Benjy]. Why wont[sic] you let him alone, so I can have some peace."²⁸

Caddy succeeds in this hard task that her mother asks to fulfill, but sure not as a quite mature mother. She behaves as a sensitive and childlike mother, as it is stated by Lawerance Thompson:

Caddy, motivated by her compassion for her younger brother, has eagerly given Ben the kind of motherly attention previously denied to him because of his own mother's inadequacies. Tenderly, solicitously, Caddy has discovered ways of applying to Ben's

limited responses, to satisfy his instinctive and unreasoning hunger for orderliness, peacefulness and serenity.²⁹

Taking care of her brothers and be close to them add more to the desolation of Caddy and lead to the creation of her negative image. She tries to be a merciful mother who answers her brother's needs, but at last finds herself a guilty one. Her close relation with her brother Quentine ends with crime of incest which paradoxically, "a scheme for regaining lost innocence".

Quentine is the initiator of her sinful being and leads to Caddy's moral destruction while the other bother (Ben) has frequently evoked in her the sense of guilt. So, the latter (Ben) is just like a moral mirror that reflects Caddy's guilty sense after having her sexual experience.

We ran up kitchen steps, onto the porch, and Caddy knelt down in the dark and held me. I could hear her and feel her chest. 'I want'. She said. 'I wont anymore, ever. Benjy. Benjy.' Then she was crying, and I cried, and held each other.³⁰

Consequently, Caddy willingly agrees to have sex and commit incest which is not as a fulfillment for her own desire rather as an attempt to express her independency and individuality through this way of rejection.³⁰ She assures that: "When they touched me, I died".³¹

In fact, Caddy instead of proving her own individuality and independency from the Compson world in her sexual behavior leads to have an illegitimate child which is an evidence on Campsons' negative world. She is viewed as a negative entity. Her father looks to her as the one who has no respect since she is a woman, "I did not mean to speak so sharply but women have no respect for each other and for themselves".³²

Through the misery of Caddy, Faulkner presents an implicit message that if the society wants to keep the heavenly innocent childhood image and never create negative women (like Caddy), it has to focus more on the abuse issues in the modern society.

To go on with Faulkner in his journey that tries to stand on the gaps that create the weakness in modern society, one has to leave Caddy's misery and go to examine Temple Darke, the central figure in Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary* which adopts the modern male's view that woman has an analogy with evil.

In this novel which consists of two parts, Temple Drake is a young collage girl landed by her drunken escort, Gowan Stevens in the hands of a group of moon-shiners. Later on, Stevens discards her there. After many panic and horrific episodes, she is criminally assaulted by a member of the band named Popeye. The latter is suspected of having Negro blood. Moreover, he is sexually impotent, and therefore must perform his purpose by the use of indirect means which are overwhelmingly vile, brutal and revolting. Popeye is really a wicked person since he does not only assault and hurt Temple but also shoots Tommy, the feeble-minded fellow who tries to protect her.

Popeye has taken Temple off to a brothel in Memphis. Unfortunately, all what happened now attached to Goodwin, the head of moonshiners, who is accused of both crimes and is convicted on the false testimony of Temple. Finally, Popeye is accidentally hanged for a crime he did not commit, and Temple is taken away by her father.

Actually, Temple's erotic relation with the members of the band and Popeye's committing of criminal assault upon her by artificial means lead to make Temple be in danger and have a momentary hallucination that her body has changed into that of a boy. Such a wakening belief within herself is a result of the fusion of the ideas of rape, castration and death. Sometimes out of her hallucination, she behaves as a dead or as a blind woman who is unable to see her right way. She becomes extraneous woman out of the crisis of her psychosexual life which ends in being criminal and negative one.

Temple kills her lover, Goodwin, the bootlegger by giving a false testimony against him and also crushes the lawyer who tries to help her. She has become an automatic engine of destruction and hates herself for being a woman, the weak sex.³³ "To be a woman is worse than death or the same as death. Therefore, I will take my revenge upon all you men."³⁴

In fact, Temple's ambivalence between her hatred toward men and toward women is "a dramatization of the impact between the forces of instinctual evil and the forces of an evil and savage conscious".³⁵ And such a conflict can also be described by the psychoanalytic critics as a struggle between Id and Super-ego of Temple. In other words, Temple is employed by Faulkner to echo the violent eruption of unconscious forces of woman that motivate her to deny her femininity and be negative woman.

In few words, Temple can be regarded as a victim of the brutality of men who exploit any woman tries to liberate her instinctive desires. Temple shows an attempt to liberate herself from being prisoner of her own bound desires and escape from the weakness of woman. But finally, she finds herself become an evidence for the violent eruption of unconscious forces of women that lead to the destruction of her inner world first and the outside one latter.³⁶

It is obviously noticed Faulkner introduces different types of desperate and negative female character whose psyche is just like a vehicle for ache, trouble, anguish and grief out of her unjust exploitation by family, men or society.

Conclusion

Essentially, Faulkner in his introducing to the image of negative woman, as it is illustrated in all of the female characters that have been analyzed in this study, does not try to undermine women and their roles in society or to fight men and find a way to flee from their grasps. Rather, Faulkner tries to criticize the society and all its components, mainly men who are the controllers of women. He also points that woman feels there is no sanctuary for her being in this masculine world.

Faulkner's female characters appear as negative women because they are alienated from their true nature as women and also because they live in isolation from their own real roles in society. Faulkner in his fiction invites the reader to have a journey with woman in her outside world that is built on the interaction of gender, class, culture, and society and at the same time to build a new positive image of modern woman who has to be an anti-Faulknerian one.

Notes:

- 1-Wendy Brock, "The Role of Woman in Literature" www.literature_studies/jr-woman.com accessed on 13-1-2018.
- 2-Ibid.
- 3 -"Women and Western Culture" www.women_studies.com accessed on 22-1-2019.
- 4-Ibid.
- 5-Ibid.
- 6-Paul West, ed. *The Modern Novel*, vol.2 (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), p.254.
- 7-Arthur F. Kinney ed. *William Faulkner Short Stories*. (New York: Random House. Inc. 1982) p.263. All the textual references of Faulkner's "An Oder of Verbena" and "Dry September" are related to this edition.
- 8-Diane Robert, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, (New York: Warwick University, 1995), p.152.
- 9-Kinney, p.263.
- 10-Ibid, p.256.
- 11-Ibid, p.264.
- 12-Ibid, pp.157-158.
- 13-George L. Dillon, "Faulkner and Woman" www.se/literture_american_studies.com accessed on 17-2-2019.
- 14-Ibid.
- 15- "Alienation and Isolation in Faulkner's 'A Ross for Emily'" www.faulkner_short_stories.com accessed on 11-2-2019.
- 16-Hall Blyth, "Faulkner's 'A Ross for Emily'" in *Literature for Compos* 4th ed, ed. Sylven Barnet, etal (New York: Harper Collins, 1996)p.114.
- 17-Ibid, 115.

- 18-Reginald Martin, "Race, Gender, and Class in Faulkner: Short Stories" http://www.faulkner_race/ik.gender_fiction.com accessed on 21-1-2019.
- 19-Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner*. (New Herman: Yale UP, 1963), p.78.
- 20-Blyth, p.120.
- 21-Philp Cohen, "Faulkner and Racism" [www. Fiction_studies.com](http://www.Fiction_studies.com) accessed on 22-3-2010.
- 22-Kenney, p.278.
- 23-Martin.
- 24-Cohen.
- 25-Kenney,p.279.
- 26-Maynard Mock, ed. *Twentieth Century Views: Faulkner Series Edition* (Yale University, 1989), p.106.
- 27-Joseph Blotner & Noel Polk, eds. *William Faulkner: Novels 1925-1930* (New York: Penguin Putram Inc. 1985) (p.742). All the textual references (in this study) of Faulkner's *Sound and Fury* are related to this edition.
- 28-Janetkay Blaylock, "Women and their Roles in Faulkner's Fiction" www.feminsit_studies/32j/k_faulkner.com accessed on 1-2-2019.
- 29-Mock, p.110.
- 30-Blotner&Polk, p.792.
- 31-Ibid, p.793.
- 32-Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.63.
- 33-Ibid, p.66.
- 34- "Faulkner Sanctuary and Bad Taste" www.faulkner_sanctuary_fiction.com accessed on 11-12-2019.
- 35-Joseph Blotner & Noel Polk, eds. *William Faulkner: Novels 1930-1935* (New York: Penguin Putram Inc. 1985) (p.284). All the textual references (in this study) of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* are related to this edition.
- 36-Mock, p.142.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**There are no conflicts of interest****References**

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