

# A Comparative Analysis of Tragic Romance in The Scarlet Letter and A Rose for Emily

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the tragic romance of the female protagonists, Hester Prynne and Emily Grierson, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" respectively. It aims to explain the shared elements and unique traits of their love stories. The analysis reveals the profound impacts of societal constraints, differing views on love, and their individual coping mechanisms.

**Keywords:** The Scarlet Letter, A Rose for Emily, Tragic Romance, Commonalities, Differences, Individual Response, Comparative Analysis.

Love, intricate yet resonant, serves as a central theme that reverberates in literature, invariably shaping characters' destinies and sometimes culminating in profound tragedies. Two such characters experiencing love that ends in sorrow are Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" and Emily Grierson in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily". These two works, although written in different eras and settings, share some commonalities in their societal context while differing in the portrayal of their protagonists' views and values on love. This comparative literary analysis aims to examine the tragic love of Hester Prynne and Emily Grierson, exploring the common societal barriers they face and the contrasting perspectives on love, through which we can gain further insights into the depiction of tragic love in these works and its reflections on societal and individual implications.

Viewed from the perspective of commonalities, the tragic ending of Hester's and Emily's romantic relationship possess a kind of inevitability. On the one hand, their flawed love originates from profound loneliness, deeply rooted in their roles as societal victims and sacrificial lambs. Bertrand Russell, in his autobiographical prologue, writes about love, "I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss" (Russell 3). It suggests that despite everyone's inherent solitude, there exists an innate desire to alleviate this sensation, thus giving birth to the concept of "love" to guard oneself against the unfamiliarity and harshness of the external world.

There is no doubt that Hester and Emily epitomize this loneliness. Hester Prynne arrived alone in a rigid society, kidnapped in a loveless marriage. This sense of solitude, amplified by the community's hostility towards her distinctiveness, largely catalyzed her illicit affair with Arthur Dimmesdale. Similarly, born into a traditionally conservative upper-class, Emily Grierson experienced similar isolation, losing any possibility of forming a close relationship due to her overbearing father, which coupled with her stubborn refusal to adapt to societal changes after the Civil War, inducing her twisted yearning for the world beyond her self-imposed barriers. Consequently, when it became apparent that Homer was disinterested in marriage and perhaps on the verge of deserting her, Emily's fear of returning to solitude spurred her towards extreme actions. Therefore, the love affairs of both women were not baseless but instead were the products of loneliness nurtured by religious or familial oppression.

On the other hand, their tragic love stories were fated by the completely opposed identities they held in relation to their lovers, and their unwavering one-sided devotion and loyalty. Hester, a sinful figure, and Dimmesdale, a Puritan minister epitomizing societal morality and religious virtues, occupied opposite poles in their community. As Hester confronted societal censure for their mutual sin, Dimmesdale maintained his silence, thereby preserving his own reputation at her expense, whose actions or rather inactions exposed a sharp contrast to Hester's fortitude and resilience. Staunchly concealing his identity, her unilateral commitment and sacrifice amplify the imbalance inherent in their relationship, exacerbating their tragic tale. Likewise, Emily, a vestige of the decaying Southern aristocracy, and Homer, a laborer representing the evolving societal norms of the North, embody absolutely opposed social classes, emphasizing the impossibility of his genuinely loving or understanding Emily. Her readiness to disobey societal norms for a lower-class Homer, reciprocated with nothing but indifference that dooms her to a tragic end.

Viewed from the perspective of differences, although they both ended up with tragic endings, their respective journeys of suffering and struggle were remarkably distinct. On the one hand, Hester and Emily had radically different views on love. Hester regarded love as a matter of protection and sacrifice. Despite Dimmesdale's timidity and evasion of responsibility, when her husband insisted on uncovering Dimmesdale's identity, she did not hesitate to take the blame on herself to protect him: "Thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any" (Hawthorne 4). After their reunion, she daringly proposed an elopement, imagining a new life together and expressing a firm determination to stand by him: "Thou shalt not go alone" (Hawthorne 7). Contrastingly, Emily regarded love as possession and companionship. Just as she refused to acknowledge her father's death, she couldn't tolerate any form of loss or separation, killing her lover with poison, thus retaining

him eternally by her side. She established a perception of pathological sexual relationships, often based on a state of “symbiosis,” meaning that “without each other, they would seem weak or even non-existent” (Yao 33).

On the other hand, Hester’s love is public, while Emily’s love is hidden. Despite public judgment and condemnation, Hester bravely confronted the predicament, refusing to evade and actively seeking redemption and self-worth in society, whose persistence and resilience ultimately later earned the respect and sympathy of others, while Emily was more secret and introverted, opting for seclusion and concealment to shut herself off from the outside world, gradually immersing herself in suffering illusions, leading to an enduring silence.

One significant reason for such different individual response lies in their representative roles in their respective stories. Hester represents a rebelling force against the old, while Emily represents stubborn resistance being replaced by the new. According to Marxist theory, the old symbolizes outdated social systems, economic structures, and ideologies, whereas the new represents emerging production relations, social orders, and ideas, constantly surfacing to replace the old. Hester, an outsider in a town strictly adhering to Puritan doctrine, represents the reflective and rebellious in Puritan soil by defying the moral norms and religious beliefs of the community, demonstrating personal courage and autonomy, and conveying a longing for freedom, independence, and human liberation. In contrast, Emily represents the old things being challenged. As a native-born person, with constant constraint and monitoring, Emily born the tag of nobility since birth, leaving the imprint of southern aristocracy deeply ingrained in her psyche, stubbornly sticking to the declining southern aristocratic customs even after the American Civil War, so the setting of her character is clearly in opposition to historical trends. Thus, the contrasting personal experiences and identities within their story settings inevitably led to their divergent choices regarding love in the face of condemnation.

In conclusion, both Hester and Emily’s stories highlight the profound impact of societal norms on individual love, as well as the tragic consequences of rigid social structures and their respective identity irreconcilable with that of his lover. At the same time, their contrasting views on love, as protection and as possession, and their divergent responses to social condemnation created different tragic colors under similar tragic romance.

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