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RUINS OF THE HEART: EMOTIONAL STASIS AND CULTURAL DECAY IN MISS HAVISHAM (*GREAT EXPECTATIONS*) AND EMILY GRIERSON ("A ROSE FOR EMILY")

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative literary analysis of Charles Dickens's Great Expectations *(1861) and William Faulkner's "*A Rose for Emily*" (1930), focusing on the characters of Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson. By examining intersecting themes such as decay, isolation, and emotional stasis, the study explores how both authors utilize Gothic elements to critique social norms, gender expectations, and the psychological consequences of betrayal and loss. Drawing on psychoanalytic and feminist literary criticism, it argues that Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson embody extreme responses to trauma, evolving into haunting figures of feminine decline. Engaging with critical perspectives from Hilary Schor, Judith Fetterley, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, John Lucas, Noel Polk, and Julia Kristeva, the paper situates these women within broader discourses on trauma, memory, and the grotesque. Ultimately, the comparison reveals how their emotional stagnation serves as a metaphor for wider cultural crises – the disintegration of Victorian idealism and the decay of the Old South.*

KEYWORDS :*Emotional stasis, Gothic literature, Miss Havisham, Emily Grierson, feminist criticism, psychoanalytic theory, cultural decay.*

INTRODUCTION

In literature, Gothic motifs have long served as vehicles for exploring the psychological and societal fractures beneath the surface of cultural ideals. Among the many figures who shape this literary tradition are two haunting women: Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and Emily Grierson from William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930). These two women stand out as enduring symbols of emotional paralysis and decay. Though separated by geography, era, and narrative form, both characters share a disturbing stillness that reflects the damage caused by betrayal, repression, and unattainable social expectations. Veiled in mystery and confined to decaying domestic spaces, these women serve not merely as tragic individuals, but as representations of broader cultural decline.

Both Dickens and Faulkner employ Gothic conventions—decaying mansions, reclusive female figures, and disrupted temporalities—to interrogate the emotional toll of patriarchal societies. Miss Havisham, abandoned at the altar, turns her home into a shrine of unhealed grief, while Emily Grierson clings to a distorted vision of love and identity, even in the face of death. These characters are not only shaped by their traumas, but also become instruments through which their authors critique the social values of their respective worlds. Specifically, they examine the fading idealism of Victorian England and the crumbling aristocracy of the American South. This paper situates Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson within the intersecting frameworks of feminist and psychoanalytic literary criticism, drawing on the works of scholars such as Hilary Schor, Judith Fetterley, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, John Lucas, Noel Polk, and Julia Kristeva. Through close textual analysis and comparative examination, it seeks to reveal how these women's psychological deterioration and symbolic significance expose tensions around gender, memory, and power.

The Objective of this study is to conduct a comparative literary analysis of *Great Expectations* and "A Rose for Emily", focusing on how Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson exemplify emotional stasis and decay in response to trauma. It further explores how their portrayals function as cultural critiques, using Gothic conventions to reflect the disintegration of both personal identity and societal order.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly works reveal a rich discourse of feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations of Dickens and Faulkner's texts. Feminist critics such as Judith Fetterley, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have explored how literature marginalizes women and silences their voices. Fetterley argues that American literature compels women readers to identify with male perspectives, effectively marginalizing female experience (Fetterley). Gilbert and Gubar have foregrounded the figure of the "madwoman" as a symbolic connection between resistance and repression. They argue that "the madwoman in the attic" functions as a double for the silenced female author, embodying both rage and rebellion (Gilbert and Gubar 83). This reading illuminates the narratives of Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson, who exist on the margins of their patriarchal societies as embodiments of silenced resistance.

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Rosemarie Bodenheimer situates Dickens's Gothic aesthetic within the moral and gender anxieties of the Victorian age, noting that "the grotesque body of Miss Havisham stages a drama of both gendered collapse and social paralysis" (Bodenheimer 122). Hilary Schor deepens this view by examining how *Great Expectations* interrogates the shaping of female identity within a familial economy of power and secrecy. She writes, "Miss Havisham is more than a victim of betrayal; she becomes its curator, turning her domestic space into a shrine of suspended time" (Schor 97).

Faulknerian criticism by Cleanth Brooks and Noel Polk emphasizes the function of Southern Gothic conventions in representing cultural decline and historical memory. Brooks observes that Faulkner's South is "haunted by a past it cannot relinquish and a future it cannot shape" (Brooks 211), while Polk highlights Emily's character as "the embodiment of a Southern code gone rigid and toxic" (Polk 59). David Minter adds that Faulkner's characterization draws heavily from biographical resonances with Southern aristocracy and familial tension (Minter 134).

Paula Treichler's work on discourse and women's mental health also provides a useful analytical framework. She contends that psychiatric diagnoses often serve as "narratives that silence women" and pathologize their resistance (Treichler 64), a perspective that enhances our understanding of the psychological confinement experienced by both Miss Havisham and Emily.

Scholarly engagement with these characters emphasizes their symbolic roles in cultural and historical critique. In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham is frequently analyzed as a figure of Victorian repression, her decaying body and frozen time representing the toll of societal expectations. Feminist critics argue that her descent reflects the punishment of women who reject domestic and reproductive roles (Schor 102; Bodenheimer 127). Psychoanalytic interpretations, such as those informed by Julia Kristeva, read her arrested development and compulsive rituals as symptoms of unprocessed trauma and melancholia (Kristeva 5–6).

Similarly, in "A Rose for Emily", Emily Grierson is situated within the Southern Gothic tradition as a symbol of cultural decay. Fetterley asserts that her isolation "mirrors the enforced emotional confinement of Southern women" (Fetterley 241), while Polk and Lucas interpret her home as a mausoleum preserving aristocratic ideals that have long since eroded (Polk 61; Lucas 88). Kristeva's concept of abjection is particularly relevant here, illuminating how both women's grotesque transformations reflect a deeper psychological and social rejection (Kristeva 4).

Together, these critical perspectives offer a coherent framework for understanding Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson as metaphors of gendered repression, cultural inertia, and the enduring effects of emotional trauma.

Despite extensive feminist and psychoanalytic research on Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson, few studies have conducted a direct comparative analysis of these characters as intertwined symbols of emotional stasis and cultural decay across Victorian and Southern Gothic contexts. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the intersection of gender, trauma, and spatial symbolism, emphasizing how both characters' physical and psychological ruins serve as sites of resistance and silence within their respective socio-historical frameworks. By integrating psychoanalytic theory with a nuanced reading of Gothic aesthetics, this study offers a novel understanding of how these haunting female figures articulate the "ruins of the heart" as both personal and cultural collapse.

RESEARCH METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research method grounded in close reading and comparative analysis. The methodology integrates psychoanalytic and feminist literary criticism to examine the psychological and cultural dimensions of the characters. The psychoanalytic approach considers the characters' emotional stasis and manifestations of trauma, while the feminist perspective investigates the gendered dynamics of power, confinement, and social expectation that shape their decline. Building on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, the analysis also examines how narrative perspectives construct and constrain female subjectivity in both texts (Mulvey 10). Additionally, the psychoanalytic frameworks of Julia Kristeva's abjection and Sigmund Freud's melancholia provide critical tools to interpret the psychological effects of trauma and loss that define Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson (Kristeva; Freud). This interdisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how Gothic conventions articulate both individual and cultural trauma.

FINDINGS

The physical and emotional decay experienced by Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson can be understood through Elisabeth Bronfen's exploration of death and femininity, which highlights how women's identities become intertwined with cultural representations of mortality (Bronfen). Dickens's use of Gothic spaces—such as the decaying Satis House—aligns with Punter's characterization of the Gothic house as a symbol of societal and psychological collapse (Punter). In Faulkner's narrative, Emily's repressive isolation and denial of death reflect the Southern Gothic tradition's fixation on memory and regional identity, themes emphasized by Minter and Oates (Minter; Oates). The grotesque preservation of Emily's lover's corpse signifies both personal trauma and the cultural paralysis of the Old South.

The study finds that both Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson transmute personal grief into an all-consuming identity that shapes their physical spaces and psychic realities. Through decaying mansions, temporal distortion, and emotional isolation, Dickens and Faulkner use Gothic tropes to critique dominant cultural ideologies. Miss Havisham reflects the anxieties of

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Victorian England concerning gender and class rigidity, while Emily Grierson exposes the South's nostalgic resistance to moral reckoning. Their emotional lives function as metaphors for historical stasis—the decline of Victorian idealism and the decay of the postbellum American South.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This part explores the complex experiences of Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Emily Grierson in Faulkner's *"A Rose for Emily"* through three interrelated themes: **decay** (physical, emotional, and social), **isolation** (both voluntary and enforced) and **emotional stasis** (the refusal to mourn and move forward)**.** These themes reveal how the characters are not merely passive victims of their circumstances, but active agents shaping their symbolic ruins. By examining physical, emotional, and social decay, the voluntary and enforced isolation they endure, and their refusal to mourn and move forward, this analysis highlights the psychological and cultural tensions embodied in these iconic figures. Using Gothic literary conventions and psychoanalytic theory, the section demonstrates how these women's grotesque transformations serve as critiques of the societies they inhabit.

Decay — Physical, Emotional, and Social

The Gothic tradition, with its emphasis on decay, isolation, and the uncanny, provides a vital lens for exploring the psychological and cultural crises embodied in these works. Scholars such as David Punter have identified Gothic motifs as central to both Victorian and Southern Gothic literature, emphasizing their role in revealing societal anxieties about change and instability (Punter 45). Through this framework, the physical and social decay surrounding Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson becomes emblematic of broader cultural decline—the fading idealism of Victorian England and the crumbling aristocracy of the American South.

Sarah Gates further demonstrates that Gothic conventions effectively dramatize emotional stasis and trauma, making them especially useful for interpreting characters trapped in time and memory (Gates 334). In both texts, the decaying homes of Miss Havisham and Emily serve as powerful symbols of deterioration, marking the decline of personal and societal structures alike.

Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, Julia Kristeva's concept of **abjection**— "what disturbs identity, system, order"—reveals the fragility of these women's selves as they navigate boundaries between life and death, self and other (Kristeva 4). This understanding of abjection aligns with Freud's work on mourning and melancholia, which describes psychological paralysis resulting from unresolved grief (Freud 247). Such frameworks illuminate how decay operates not only as a physical reality but also as a psychological and social condition in these narratives.

Decay is the most visible motif linking Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson. Both women live in houses that serve as extensions of their own bodies—sites of decomposition, dust, and arrested time. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's first view of Miss Havisham presents her as a living corpse:

"I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes" (Dickens 99).

Miss Havisham's house, Satis House, with its stopped clocks and rotting cake, becomes a monument to decline. John Lucas notes that she is "the embodiment of a world rotting from within, consumed by its own nostalgia and grievances" (Lucas 142). Miss Havisham's body and surroundings collapse the boundary between private trauma and public allegory, transforming her into a grotesque figure of Victorian moral decline.

Similarly, Faulkner's description of Emily's house emphasizes its status as a decaying relic:
"It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies…only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps" (Faulkner 119).
Cleanth Brooks writes that Emily's house "stands as a decayed monument to the South's inability to modernize or morally regenerate after the Civil War" (Brooks 170). Emily's personal decay parallels the broader decline of her community, making her both a victim and a symptom of historical collapse.

Kristeva's theory of abjection sharpens this reading. For Kristeva, the corpse is the ultimate site of abjection, "death infecting life" (Kristeva, 4). Emily's preservation of Homer Barron's body is thus not merely a personal quirk, but a profound act of defiance against the natural order. Her refusal to let the dead stay dead literalizes the Southern inability to reckon with its own past.

Isolation — Voluntary and Socially Enforced Seclusion

Both Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson retreat from the world, but their isolation is not purely self-imposed. Rather, it reflects a complex interplay between internal psychological collapse and the external pressures of patriarchal society. Their withdrawal functions not only as an expression of grief and trauma, but also as a response to a culture that constrains female autonomy.

Miss Havisham's seclusion within Satis House begins as a response to personal betrayal, however, it evolves into a sustained attempt to exert emotional control over others—particularly Estella and Pip. Her retreat creates a cloistered world where time stands still and pain is curated. Pip recounts her bitter confession: "Believe this: when she first came, I meant to save her from misery like my own. At first, I meant no more" (Dickens.364). Her intentions, initially maternal, curdle into manipulation as she enacts her trauma on the next generation. Hilary Schor observes that Miss Havisham's isolation "is at once an imprisonment and a perverse form of autonomy in a society that denies women independent agency" (Schor 214). While her withdrawal offers

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refuge from male dominance, it also traps her in an identity defined by injury, turning her into both prisoner and jailer of her own emotional ruin.

Emily Grierson's isolation, too, is shaped as much by social expectation as by private sorrow. Following her father's death, her community's initial sympathy gives way to surveillance and gossip, signaling the town's ambivalence toward a woman alone. The narrator notes: "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will" (Faulkner 122). Judith Fetterley emphasizes the cultural dimensions of this isolation: "Emily's house becomes a prison built not just by her father's authority but by a whole culture that defines women as property" (Fetterley 62). Her seclusion, then, is not merely eccentricity or stubbornness, but it is the predictable result of a social system that denies women meaningful independence, especially after their roles as daughters or potential wives are exhausted.

Noel Polk's formalist reading further underlines how Faulkner's structure mirrors this isolation: "The nonlinear telling dramatizes Emily's disappearance from public time, her progressive removal from communal life" (Polk 206). The disjointed narrative reflects not only Emily's psychological detachment, but also the town's limited access to her inner world. She becomes an enigma confined within crumbling walls, an object of both fascination and horror—rendered visible only through rumor, memory, and myth.

In both texts, isolation becomes a form of living death: a slow erasure of self that reflects how personal loss and cultural constraints serve in silencing the two women. Their withdrawal is not only a symptom of trauma, but also a grim strategy of survival in a world that offers them little options.

Emotional Stasis — Refusing to Mourn

While physical decay and social isolation are important motifs, the central tragedy of both Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson lies in their refusal to process grief and move forward. Each character, in her own way, embodies what Freud describes as the melancholic subject. In Mourning and Melancholia, Freud writes: "The melancholic displays a profound loss of interest in the outside world, a turning away that binds libido to the lost object, transforming grief into permanent identification" (Freud 244).
This concept of melancholia captures the emotional inertia at the core of their respective narratives: rather than mourning and eventually detaching from their losses, both women internalize their grief, allowing it to define their identities and actions.

Miss Havisham exemplifies this condition through her refusal to acknowledge the passage of time or let go of the moment she was abandoned by the man she loved. She stops all the clocks, keeps the wedding feast untouched, and remains in her bridal gown for decades. As Bodenheimer observes, "She is fixated on the moment of trauma, unable to reintegrate herself into linear time or recover the emotional wholeness she lost" (Bodenheimer 198). Her actions signal not just a personal sorrow, but a psychological commitment to preserving that sorrow. By raising Estella to enact revenge on men, Miss Havisham attempts to universalize her betrayal, projecting her pain outward in a distorted quest for meaning and agency.

Emily Grierson, in contrast, channels her melancholia into an even darker and more destructive gesture. Her emotional paralysis culminates in the murder of Homer Barron and the haunting preservation of his body within a bedroom dressed for a wedding. Faulkner writes:
"The man himself lay in the bed…a thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal" (Faulkner 127).
This shocking revelation underscores the extremity of Emily's denial. By refusing to accept Homer's absence or potential abandonment, she collapses love, possession, and death into a single, grotesque gesture. David Minter argues: "She clings to Homer as the South clings to its myths, embalming a way of life that is long dead" (Minter 144). Emily's private tragedy, thus becomes emblematic of a broader cultural decay. Her emotional stasis mirrors the South's refusal to reckon with its own historical losses, rendering both her and her society suspended in a state of arrested mourning.

In both cases, mourning is not a process but a suspended condition—an emotional stasis in which grief becomes identity. Their unwillingness or inability to mourn leads to a breakdown of boundaries: between past and present, love and violence, self and other. Through their characters, Dickens and Faulkner dramatize the destructive consequences of unresolved loss, showing how the refusal to let go can rot both the self and the world around it.

CONCLUSION

Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson stand as haunting monuments to the destructive power of unresolved grief. Both characters transform personal loss into a permanent state of being, reshaping their homes, bodies, and relationships around wounds that time cannot heal. Their resistance to forward movement—whether through Miss Havisham's suspended wedding day or Emily's grotesque preservation of a lover's corpse—reveals the psychological cost of trauma when compounded by social and cultural repression.

Yet these women's narratives extend well beyond personal tragedy. They serve as potent allegories for broader cultural decay. Miss Havisham's ruined estate and arrested life reflect Victorian anxieties about gender roles, class rigidity, and the crumbling facade of moral propriety. Similarly, Emily Grierson becomes a symbol of the American South's failure to confront its post-Civil War decline, embodying a region frozen in nostalgia and denial. In both cases, the women become living relics—figures through which their respective societies project fears about change, loss, and instability.

Through shared themes of decay, isolation, and emotional stasis, Dickens and Faulkner utilize Gothic conventions not merely to dramatize psychological trauma, but also to expose the social and

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cultural structures that uphold it. The decaying houses, disrupted temporalities, and spectral femininity associated with Miss Havisham and Emily Grierson underscore how individual suffering is shaped and sustained by collective histories and ideologies.

Ultimately, the comparison between these two figures reveals a powerful intersection between personal grief and cultural critique. Their stories invite readers to consider how trauma is both lived and inherited, how spaces of domestic intimacy become theaters of haunting, and how literature uses the Gothic not only to evoke fear—but to interrogate the very systems that produce it.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research might consider a comparative study with other Gothic female characters, such as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* or the unnamed narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, to expand the understanding of madness, confinement, and female identity. Further exploration of Emily Grierson's character within the context of post-Civil War Southern racial dynamics could yield deeper insights into Faulkner's regional critique. Additionally, an investigation into narrative structure—particularly the manipulation of time in both texts—could illuminate how trauma disrupts linear storytelling, reflecting the nonlinear experience of psychological pain.

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