

“A Rose for Emily”: The Dichotomy of a Rose

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Abstract

As one of the most prominent figures of Southern literature, William Faulkner is known for his highly accurate and critical depictions of the South, most notably during its transition from the plantation era to the industrial age. His work presents all aspects of the changing South and its colourful cast of characters. Perhaps none are as emblematic and ambiguous as that of “A Rose for Emily”’s eponymous character, Emily Grierson. Through his innovative use of narration and his portrayal of her, Faulkner represents the transitioning South as it moves from one era to the next, with all the crises and complexities it entails. Written in the prime of the feminist movement, “A Rose for Emily” portrays a character caught between identities: the masculine and the feminine, the past and the present, the passive and the active. Going from subject to object and back again throughout the narrative, Miss Emily Grierson is the embodiment of the rose her creator symbolically gifts her. She is the petals of the flower, supple and soft, and the thorns of the stem, harsh and unyielding.

1. Introduction

“A Rose for Emily” is one of William Faulkner’s most studied works. Written in 1930, the short story follows the downfall of Miss Emily Grierson, from her early womanhood to her eventual death. Like much of Faulkner’s work, the action takes place in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Faulkner was clearly fascinated with the old American South and its slow decay following the Revolutionary War, to be replaced by an unfamiliar “New South” (Roberts 234). While this theme, and many other recurring aspects of Faulkner’s writing, such as the importance and use of time, can be found in “A Rose for Emily”, a more sparingly studied facet of the short story lies in the title and its relation to the eponymous character. Why does Faulkner ‘give’ a rose to Emily? And why does he associate her to that particular flower? Through a close reading of the text, a postmodern, feminist and

psychoanalytic analysis of the text and its characters, we will see that the rose, with its soft petals and sharp thorns, is in fact emblematic of Emily and defines her character throughout the story.

2. William Faulkner and the Confederate Woman: a tale of ambiguity

William Faulkner (1897-1962) was born and lived most of his life in Mississippi. His life was therefore embedded in the South and he was greatly influenced by his heritage and everything it entailed. While the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) was long over by the time he was born, Faulkner was fascinated by the changes that occurred in the South between the period preceding it and the evolution in ideology and society that followed it. This is illustrated in much of his work, most of which is set in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha. As in “A Rose for Emily”, Faulkner’s work often portrays the changing of the guard between the highly hierarchical society of the old South, based on property and status, race and slavery, and the society of the “New South” (Roberts 234), which was formed during and after the industrial revolution, and left behind ideas of aristocracy for gentrification. One hallmark of this transition is the character which has been defined as “the Confederate Woman” (233). She is an essential element in many of Faulkner’s stories as he reimagined her to embody “a figure in crisis” (234) and represent the “wreck of a society through fluid gender and race roles” (234). As Roberts defines her, “[t]he Confederate Woman comes from women taking on traditionally masculine roles but with no sacrifice of what the culture identifies as essential white femininity” (235). Faulkner uses the “Confederate Woman” (233) in stories such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom* and *The Unvanquished*. In the latter, Rosa Millard “becomes

master, wielder of ‘masculine’ ownership of children and slaves” (238) while maintaining her “ladyhood” (238). Faulkner is therefore no stranger to portraying ambiguous female characters, and this holds true for Miss Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily”. Throughout the short story, her character is portrayed alternately as masculine and feminine, strong and weak, young and old.

The “Confederate Woman” usually describes a female character living during the American Revolutionary War. As in *The Unvanquished*, she takes on a leading, masculine role in society during the war to compensate for the men’s departure, while retaining her feminine attributes such as piety and care. Miss Grierson’s story is clearly set after the War of Independence, as evidenced by the mention of the year “1894” (Faulkner 1), and yet Faulkner chooses to represent her as a “Confederate Woman”. While Emily does not experience the Revolutionary War, she embodies the last vestiges of the Old South. Her presence in a town undergoing gentrification and moving on from the values her family stands for bridges the gap between two worlds, the plantation era and the post-war and industrial revolution age. In addition, her father’s death, like the departure of soldiers during wartime, forces her to take charge of her own destiny. She becomes her own master and the owner of a slave and a house thereby embodying a highly masculine role. However, this new role and newfound power does not erase her femininity. She gives “lessons in china-painting” (Faulkner 6) and is seemingly courted by a “foreman named Homer Barron” (4) whom she prepares to marry. Therefore, as she combines masculine and feminine roles, Miss Emily can be considered a “Confederate Woman”.

Emily Grierson also embodies “a figure in crisis” (Roberts 234). She is shaken by the death of her father whose body she refuses to give up for several days, clinging to him in the same way she clings to antiquated ideals which have no place in the new societal order. In fact, her attachment to the body of her father and Homer Barron can be seen as a metaphor for her existential crisis. Emily lives in a time of transition, her family represents the last of the Old South and its ideals while the world around them is shifting and embracing modernity in the form of new money, paved roads and “free postal delivery” (Faulkner 7). Miss Grierson’s peculiar position in the town means she belongs neither to the past nor the present: she is tethered to the past by her family name, her house and her upbringing, while the world which she must navigate is in the present. In order to reconcile her identity, she first attempts to anchor herself in the past by clinging to her dead father’s body. However, she is forced to let him go and he is “buried” (4), thereby severing her physical link to the past. Though the “house was ... left to her” (3) as well as “The Negro” (5), neither is sufficient to tie her to the past. The house is “decay[ing]” (1) and no longer the monument it once was, while “the Negro” has no real attachment to her beyond his station. As time moves on and she grows older, Emily becomes more and more a relic in a city in evolution moving towards progress. She therefore endeavours to tie herself to this present by latching on to “Homer Barron”. One can only assume he refused to marry her and she must resort to murder in order to keep him in her “bridal” (8) chamber. Again, she keeps his body to anchor herself in the present, this time carefully avoiding suspicion so as to ensure he remains in her custody. Her efforts however, are as futile as before. Emily Grierson is too attached to the past to ever belong in the present. She refuses to let her “Negro” free because she clings to the

old ideals of the plantation era where the White own and the Black belong. In addition, as old and decrepit as her house may be, she does not leave. In this way, she remains stuck in the past, not enough to belong there, yet enough to prevent her from belonging anywhere else.

In her ambiguities and her crisis, Emily Grierson embodies the “Confederate Woman” Faulkner so often uses in his work. She represents a multi-faceted character, weak and strong, masculine and feminine. These gender roles and the power attributed to them is an integral part of the character’s ambiguities both within itself and in relation to others.

3. Gender roles and power plays

“A Rose for Emily” is rife with oppositions. It seems the entire town of Jefferson is defined by these polarities which give it structure and regulate everyday life. From the black slaves owned by white proprietors to the old town being taken over by modernity, Jefferson seems to be an amalgamation of binary systems, and as many such systems do, one component dominates the other. Perhaps the most striking example of this power dichotomy is that which opposes men and women, or rather, all the men in the village to one woman, Emily Grierson.

The discourses of power discussed by postmodernists are clearly evidenced in “A Rose for Emily”. Indeed, the eponymous character is created by the narrative insofar as she is the “subject” (Butler 56) of the narrator’s discourse. She is therefore defined as “*the other*” (Butler 46) and marginalized by the townspeople who present her as “a fallen

monument” and “only a woman” (Faulkner 1). This “other-determination” (Butler 59) is made more evident by the condescending tone of certain passages, such as when “people had begun to feel sorry for her” (Faulkner 3) and “she had become humanized” (3-4). Ms. Grierson is also marginalized through the description of her house which stands as a reminder of times past in an evolving society where new roads are being built. It stands as “an eyesore among eyesores” (1), stubbornly refusing to yield to progress in much the same way Emily refuses to yield to the next generation. But in this stubborn fight, both are alienated from their surroundings and they “decay” (1) in isolation. It is perhaps fitting that “the cedar-bemused cemetery” (1) is described directly after the house; both hold corpses –which include Homer Barron and Emily – rotting away and abandoned.

Patriarchal oppression of Emily is also highly relevant in the dynamics opposing her to others. One can see this subjugation in the way she is described as having been “subordinate[d]” (Butler 45) by her father’s patriarchal figure, who had “thwarted her woman's life so many times” (Faulkner 6). As Simone de Beauvoir would say, “[h]e is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (de Beauvoir 26). Miss Emily is always under her father’s control. In her youth, she is seen as “a slender figure in white in the background” (Faulkner 3), overshadowed by her father’s “spraddled silhouette in the foreground ... clutching a horsewhip” (3). This phrasing is reminiscent of Faulkner’s description of Homer and Emily’s outings, during which Homer has “reins and whip in a yellow glove” (6), indicating that Homer is just as overbearing and controlling as Mr. Grierson had been. The latter’s domineering figure casts its shadow over Miss Emily until her death. During her funeral, “the crayon face of her father mus[es] profoundly above the bier” (7). In fact, we learn throughout the story that her father’s hold on Emily

was so strong that he forbade her from marrying. He “thwart[s] her woman’s life” (6) repeatedly and constantly oppresses Miss Grierson.

The patriarchy’s oppression of Emily is also visible in her interactions with the city council. While the previous mayor – Colonel Sartoris – had dispensed her from paying taxes, the new generation in power disagrees with the edict and a delegation of councilmen is sent to Miss Grierson’s house in order to persuade her to pay her dues to the town when letters remain unanswered. By showing up in numbers, the councilmen hope to intimidate and subdue Emily, something they had failed to do through their letters and calls. The evident lack of respect shown by the new generation of councilmen towards their predecessors, and by extension Emily, exposes their oppressive standpoint. Their relative position of power as members of the city council affords them fairly easy means of pressuring Emily into paying taxes, even though they must be aware of her dire financial situation.

However, Miss Emily “vanquish[es] them, horse and foot” (2) by referring them to the late Colonel Sartoris who she knows is dead. She stands firm in her resolve and recognizes the threat they pose on her identity. Their lack of respect for her position as a Lady is evidenced by their will to revoke her tax “arrangement” (1) and she is quick to put them in their place. Emily does not receive the envoys of the council as a good hostess but rather like a war general. “She d[oes] not ask them to sit” (2) and stays standing herself, indicating a clear confrontation between two parties. This refusal to sit demonstrates a masculine stance on Emily’s part, as does the scene that follows. Emily is “dry and cold” (2) and rattles her visitors so that they are left “stumbling” (2). Her answers are short and clipped and leave no room for argument. She questions the

sheriff's status, recognizing no authority greater than the late Colonel Sartoris' and quickly dismisses the men. To add insult to injury, she asks "Tobe" (2) to "see [the] gentlemen out" (2). During the entire visit, Miss Grierson holds the dominant, masculine role. She is the mistress and owner of the house and therefore decides whether or not to receive the councilmen and for how long. In addition, she stays standing during the confrontation, which indicates strength and resolve on her part. Finally, she leads the dialogue and goes so far as to give her guests orders ("See Colonel Sartoris" (2)) before dismissing them completely. While the council may have thought that brute force would bend Emily Grierson to their will, the roles are reversed and they find themselves at her mercy.

Through her life, Emily Grierson is surrounded by so many oppressive and commanding figures that she becomes alienated from society entirely, "people hardly saw her at all" (Faulkner 2). This alienation from her kinfolk is so pronounced that she finds herself more comfortable with the dead and her aging servant than the living. While she is very rarely seen in public, she finds solace in the company of "the Negro" (1) Tobe and the corpse of Homer Barron which she keeps until her own death. We are even led to believe that she slept next to him every night from the time of his death, as evidenced by the "long strand of iron-grey hair" (8) found on the pillow next to him.

While it is easy to presume that Miss Grierson is nothing more than a poor, old woman, dominated by men and ensconced in the values of the past, she is also depicted as a symbol of feminine resistance. This defiance is visible multiple times throughout the short story. For instance, during her encounter with the pharmacist, she does not hesitate to interrupt the latter's speech on several occasions. In addition, her speech is direct and

devoid of the frivolity usually associated with female speech; Emily knows what she wants and clearly indicates that she will not leave without it when she says “I want some poison” (Faulkner 5) or “I want arsenic” (5). Finally, when the pharmacist attempts to explain that he needs to know what she intends to use the poison for, “Miss Emily just stare[s] at him ... until he look[s] away” (5). In doing so, she actively takes on a masculine and dominant role and reclaims her independence of patriarchal rule (Kirchdorfer). In this instance, she confronts and subdues her adversary until he complies with her. The scene plays out very much like a Western duel. However, the Southern version evidently seems to involve less gunfire and more strength of will.

She also vanquishes patriarchy by outliving her father and Homer, as well as most of the original council. This particular act of rebellion may not seem crucial, however, it allows Emily to free herself from her father’s oppressive and physically abusive presence – the old man did wield a “whip” (Faulkner 6) after all – and Homer’s unfortunate preference for men. By outliving them and keeping their bodies, Emily reverses the roles of oppressor and oppressed, and becomes the subject rather than the object, in the perverse relationships she keeps with the two men’s corpses. She is now the only active participant in their interactions and therefore retrieves the power they had taken from her by not allowing her to marry, in the case of her father, and allowing her to fall for an unattainable man who “liked men” (Faulkner 5), in Homer’s case. Finally, and maybe Emily’s most flagrant act of rebellion lies in her refusal to pay her taxes and her swift response to the councilmen’s attempt to make her do so. Miss Grierson’s lack of response to the council’s original letter and call clearly displays her lack of respect for the town’s new patriarchal generation.

Through these events, Miss Emily is characterized “not primarily as a psychically damaged and compulsively driven woman, but as one who methodically and deliberately challenges virtually all the social, historical, sexual, and ideological boundaries within which she lives” (Kartiganer 481). While oppressed, she takes on a feminine role; however, her ability to turn situations in her favor and gain the upper hand allows her to break out of the passive, feminine role thrust upon her by society in order to don a masculine and powerful role.

4. Gossip and reliability

Another, highly oppressive power present in “A Rose for Emily” lies directly in the text. It is the narrator’s voice. While it is difficult to determine the nature of the narrator, it seems clear that he has little respect for Miss Emily Grierson. He refers to her as a “fallen monument” (Faulkner 1) and “a duty” (1). In addition, his physical description of Emily is as unflattering as that of her house. While the latter is “an eyesore among eyesores” (1), Miss Grierson is described as “a small, fat woman in black” (2) who “looked bloated” (2). In fact, he compares her to a corpse, “a body long submerged in motionless water” (2). In doing so, the narrator displays his own oppression of Emily. However, several inconsistencies in the narration and point of view seem to indicate its unreliability.

The narrator seems to embody the voice of ‘the town’. Much of the story is recounted from the point of view of “we” (1), which places the narrator within a group of people sharing an opinion. Their view of Miss Emily is very poor and highly speculative. This group of individuals on behalf of whom the narrator claims to speak gossips over

any and every event involving Miss Grierson. Her purchase of arsenic is immediately followed by their expectation that “She will kill herself” (5) while her frequent outings with Homer Barron led to the speculation that “She w[ould] marry him” (5). When the latter disappeared, this unnamed posy was quick to pity Emily. Like a group of bored housewives, they “watch developments” (6), analyse behaviour and pass judgement without any direct knowledge of Miss Emily. They show pity, disappointment and anticipation as they watch Emily’s life unfold before their eyes. Their gaze gives them power over the object of their attention. Miss Emily’s life is depicted like a movie in which she plays the title role. She becomes a prop in a greater production meant to entertain others.

On the other hand, some of the story is told from a third person omniscient point of view which clashes with the rest of the text. Such is the case for the passages depicting Miss Grierson’s interview with the councilmen and her visit to the “druggist” (5). This change in narration is useful to the text as it provides the reader with knowledge he may not acquire otherwise, however, this supposes that the men present in both instances (the councilmen and the druggist) are not part of the greater “we” (1) usually employed by the narrator. This seems to indicate that the general “we” often used for narration does not include men, which is realistic considering the resemblance of that voice to “gossip” (Klein 229). In fact, Klein argues that Faulkner was attempting in this way to recreate the voice of “society columnists” (231). The change in narrative stance also serves a second purpose. It allows the reader to creep into the private life of Miss Emily Grierson more completely. This is yet another way in which the narrator oppresses her. His pervasive

intrusion into her home and private affairs further presents her as an object which the reader views through an omniscient looking glass.

Finally, Faulkner uses a third narrative voice, that of the third person limited “they” (1). This voice allows the narrator to distance himself from the narration by describing the actions and opinions of others. However, these others are no more defined than the previously described “we”. “They” seem to represent the new generation of Jeffersonians, including the councilmen looking to revoke Emily’s tax exemption. These individuals seem even more condescending towards Miss Emily than their ancestors. They “pity Miss Emily” (3) and label her “a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people” (6). While there does not seem to be any reason for this narrative point of view, it provides the narrator with a second group to corroborate the opinion of “we”, thereby strengthening and verifying the first group’s observations and claims. Providing two different points of view with congruent judgements and opinions seems to reinforce the narrator’s reliability and fool the reader into believing what he is told. By presenting Miss Grierson as a subject and not giving her a voice, the narrator allows the reader to identify with him and the group he represents, further oppressing her. However, the few direct quotations provided from Miss Emily contradict this carefully constructed idea of a subservient subject.

When directly presented, Emily Grierson’s dialogue indicates a strong woman taking charge and giving orders inconsistent with the opinions provided by the narrator. During her meeting with the councilmen, Emily interrupts her guests twice, “We must go by the--” (2) and “But, Miss Emily--” (2). She thereby asserts her superiority. In addition, she questions her visitors’ authority and gives them orders, dismissing them with an

exclamation “Tobe! ... Show these gentlemen out” (2). The same pattern is repeated when Miss Emily encounters the druggist. She interrupts him on three occasions. In addition, though she is the one in need of a service, she does not ask for poison and instead demands it, “I want some poison” (5). Her only question concerns the quality of the product she is requesting “Is that a good one” (5) and not the service itself. Whereas she could easily have asked for poison more courteously (Could you give me some poison? For example), such a question would necessarily have placed the druggist as the subject of the verb and given him power over the outcome of the discussion. By demanding a product, Miss Emily reverses the roles and places herself as the subject of the verb, “I want” (5). In doing so, she consciously takes on a masculine, dominating role and places herself in a position of superiority.

In his analysis, Abdurrahman argues that each narrative voice represents a specific group of people in the short story (Abdurrahman 225). He draws parallels between the narrator’s description of Miss Emily in each act and her relationship with the town, from her early days to her “defeat ... as a monument” (225). While Miss Emily’s relationship to the townspeople shifts through time, the changes in narrative voice do not coincide with the various acts of the short story. Act I contains both third person limited and omniscient passages while act II combines all three narrative voices. This argument is therefore insufficient to explain the use of all these points of view. However, each one provides a novel way in which Emily Grierson’s character can be subjugated by others and Faulkner may have used the various voices to that effect, while leaving direct dialogue so as to allow the reader to question the narrator’s reliability. While the narrator’s motive may be unknown throughout the story, other relationships can be

analysed more productively through psychoanalysis such as those Emily develops with Homer Barron and her father.

5. Emily and her men: fixation or freedom?

It is obvious from Emily's obsessive guarding of her father's and Homer's bodies that her relationship to men is warped. This may be explained psychoanalytically through an analysis of her early life with her father. As Emily's mother is never mentioned within the text, it is safe to assume she is either dead or gone and has been since Emily was quite young. The lack of a motherly influence is significant because it indicates that the young Miss Grierson may suffer from an unresolved "Oedipus complex" (Eagleton 134). As summarized by Eagleton, an Oedipus complex occurs in young girls when they are unable to assume their "feminine gender role" (135), a step which naturally occurs once they abandon the "doomed" (135) project of "seducing [their] father" (135) and "effect an identification" (135) with their mother. In Miss Emily's case, this identification is impossible because of an absent mother and so nothing opposes her "incestuous" (134) desire for her father. This fixation with her father explains why she remains for so long under his control and seemingly doesn't oppose his "thwart[ing] of her woman's life" (Faulkner 6) and his driving away of "all the young men" (4). The incestuous desires stemming from her unresolved Oedipus complex also explain her refusal to acknowledge her father's death and give his body up for burial (4).

Once she finds herself freed from her father's presence, Miss Emily is described as reborn, "her hair [is] cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels" (4). This change can be interpreted in various ways; on the one hand, her

father's death can be seen as Emily's liberation from domineering, masculine influences. Released from her Oedipus complex, Emily finds herself rejuvenated and cleansed from the impure desires that plagued her during her father's lifetime. In this scenario, Emily's issues are resolved and she is able to pursue the "woman's life" (6) her father had robbed her of. However, Miss Grierson behaves with Homer even more neurotically than she did with her father, suggesting that her issues are far from resolved. This leads to a different interpretation of Emily's rejuvenated appearance following her father's death. It is possible that this regression to girlhood is symbolic of her search for a new father figure to take the place of the old one. Now returned to her childhood, Miss Emily latches on to Homer as a surrogate father. When he refuses to marry her, she is faced with the possibility of being orphaned a second time and chooses to murder him instead of letting him go in order to control the fate of his physical presence.

Through this analysis, Miss Emily is portrayed as a victim of her own circumstances. Her Oedipus complex is forced upon her by an absent mother and she is compelled to latch on to a father figure in order to satisfy her desires. However, Emily also finds a way to liberate herself from the hold her psyche has over her by murdering Homer and taking control of her condition. Again, her portrayal is ambiguous because it depicts her at once as both a victim and a victor.

6. A Rose for a Rose

While reading "A Rose for Emily", one therefore comes to realise that Emily is a rose. Seen as delicate and fragile, pitied by the townspeople for her antiquated ideals and her steadfast adhesion to old principles, and left to the mercy of their gossip much like a

rose to the weather, she is nonetheless a symbol of resistance. Emily resists the patriarchy's attack on her by refusing to pay her taxes and standing up to male figures. She also resists time by outliving her main oppressor, her father. Emily has her thorns and she uses them to stand up to the town's patriarchal society, while never losing her composure and keeping the grace of the rose the author gifted her.

While others have likened the rose to "secrecy: the confidential relationship between the author and his character" (Getty 232) or as implying "that Miss Emily deserves a rose for having attempted ... to triumph over time and place in her quest for love." (Going), these analyses do not coincide with the recurring rose seen in the story. Getty's exploration fails to account for the comparison seen throughout the story, likening Emily herself to a rose, such as in the subtle description of what became Homer Barron's death chamber: "upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose shaded lights" (Faulkner 8). As for Going, his explanation is invalid insofar as Emily never did triumph "in her quest for love" (Going).

7. Conclusion

It is probably fair to assume that Faulkner was keenly aware of his depiction of gender struggles as he wrote "A Rose for Emily". The short story was written in 1930, just as the first wave of feminist movements rocked through the United States and right after the right of vote was granted in the country. It is therefore likely that each element, including his choice of title and specific flower, were thought out in this very context of rising feminism. The symbolic nature of the rose as an instrument of love should not be overlooked. It may represent Faulkner's attempt to finally reconcile Emily with the love

she was never given during her life. However, its well-known dichotomy of petals and thorns seems more likely to represent Emily herself than a fictional love. Her constant search for her own identity in a changing world unconcerned with her happiness leads her to take on conflicting roles in society, she is in turn placed on a pedestal and denigrated by her neighbours, powerful and powerless, much like a rose can be soft and pliant or sharp and prickly in turn.

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