

The Haunting Complexity of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

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Abstract

This article delves into William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," offering a comprehensive analysis of its multifaceted narrative. The exploration begins with a close examination of the central character, Emily Grierson, whose tragic life reflects themes of isolation, tradition, and resistance to change. The article highlights the unconventional structure of the story, which employs a non-linear timeline and multiple perspectives, creating a sense of suspense and deepening the reader's engagement with Emily's plight. Additionally, it analyzes Faulkner's distinctive writing techniques, including rich symbolism and vivid imagery, that enhance the emotional resonance of the narrative. Ultimately, the paper discusses the overarching themes of death, societal decay, and the tension between personal desire and communal expectations, illustrating how these elements intertwine to create a haunting portrait of a woman trapped by her circumstances.

Keywords

"A Rose for Emily"; Faulkner; Miss Emily.

1. Introduction

"A Rose for Emily" was first published in 1930 as Faulkner's first story to be published in a National magazine. It is divided into five parts.

The story is set in a town where the southern aristocracy gradually declines and the south achieves economic development. Miss Emily, as the representative of southern aristocrats, shows the resistance to these changes and her inner conflicts.

The story is told from the perspective of the townspeople rather than a specific person. They experience different periods in Emily's life. By the end of Part five, the narrator seems to have lived his or her life alongside Miss Emily.

2. Analysis of the Text

2.1. Characters

The main characters in this story include Miss Emily, her lover Homer Barron, and the townspeople. Miss Emily is mainly characterized by the narrator. There are several descriptions about her appearance in this story. At the time right after her father's death, she goes to the druggist to buy arsenic and she is described as "over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes". After Homer Barron's disappearance, the narrator describes that when the townspeople saw her six months later, "she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning." Before her death, when the Board of Aldermen call upon her to ask for her taxes, she is "a small, fat woman in black" who looks "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand." Homer Barron is Miss Emily's sweetheart in "A Rose for Emily," whom she seems to have murdered

with arsenic before their wedding, and whose body she lets rot upstairs in her house until her own death. When he is alive, he is "a Yankee - a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face." The narrator of "A Rose for Emily" is the voice of the townspeople of Jefferson, never identified as male or female. He or she is sympathetic to Miss Emily, though the opinion of her changes slightly during different periods in her life.

2.2. Structure

The storytelling does not follow the chronological order. In part one, the story begins with a recounting of when Miss Emily Grierson dies, and how the whole town go to her funeral. The women of the town go mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house. The reader then gets an explanation of why Miss Emily had been a "hereditary obligation upon the town." In 1894, the mayor, Colonel Sartoris, remitted her taxes after the death of her father. When the next generation came into office, the Board of Alderman have a meeting to decide how to collect taxes from Miss Emily, who repeats that Colonel Sartoris has told her she has no taxes in Jefferson, though the Colonel had been dead for almost a decade. In part two, the narrator skips back in time thirty years, to two years after the death of Miss Emily's father and just a short time after the disappearance of her sweetheart. The neighbors complains to Judge Stevens, the mayor, about the smell. They sneak over to her house and sprinkle lime around. As they cross the lawn to leave, a light comes on, and they see Miss Emily in the window. The narrator recalls that this was when "people had begun to feel really sorry for her." When the ladies of the town go to the house to call on Miss Emily the day after her father's death, Miss Emily tells them that her father is not dead. Finally, after three days and under threat of law and force, she allows her father to be buried. The townspeople do not say she is crazy then, because they assumes she has to "cling to that which had robbed her" of a married life, since her father has driven away her suitors.

In part three, the narrator follows chronologically to the arrival of the construction company to pave the sidewalks. Homer Barron is the gregarious foreman, and the townspeople begins to observe him in Miss Emily's company driving on Sundays. The old people says, "Poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her." Then the narrator tells the story of when Miss Emily goes to the druggist to request "some poison." The conversation between Miss Emily and the druggist is related word for word, and the druggist gives her the poison while strongly implying that it should only be used "for rats and such." But the narrator does not tell the reader what the poison is used for. In part four, the women of the town begins to say that her riding around in the buggy with Homer Barron, with no intention of marriage, is a "disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people." Later, Homer Barron disappears, but a neighbor reports seeing Homer Barron return to the house "at dusk one evening." But he is never seen again. After that, Miss Emily does not leave the house for six months. Years pass and Miss Emily "passed from generation to generation-dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." The town does not even know she is sick before she dies, since Tobe, her servant, does not talk to anyone.

In part five, after letting in the mourners after Miss Emily's death, Tobe disappears out the back door. The narrator describes how a group of townspeople wait until Miss Emily "was decently in the ground" before forcing open the door to a deserted room above the stairs. The room is coated in dust, and "decked and furnished as for a bridal," including a man's toiletries and "carefully folded" suit. There on the bed is the rotting body of Homer Barron in a nightshirt. On the pillow next to him, also coated in dust, is the indentation of a head, and a single strand of "iron-gray hair," which the reader can assume belonged to Miss Emily.

3. Writing techniques

There are several writing techniques used in "A Rose for Emily".

The first one is foreshadowing, which is used to allude to the ending. At the end, the townspeople discover that Miss Emily has been living with the body of her dead sweetheart for many years. In Part II, the story about how the house begins to smell takes place "a short time after her sweetheart - the one we believed would marry her - had deserted her." In Part III, when she buys arsenic from the druggist, she will not confirm that the arsenic is for killing rats. There is no explanation provided right away, but later the reader can assume that it is used to poison Homer Barron, Miss Emily's sweetheart.

Secondly, simile is used for many times to imply deeper meanings. For example, in the first description the reader has of Miss Emily, when the aldermen visit her house to ask for her taxes, she is described as "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue." This comparison of Miss Emily to a drowned body suggests that she has been dead inside for a time now. The "motionless water" is the house around her, which remains frozen in a time past as the world outside changes. When the door is forced open to the deserted room in Part V, the narrator reports that "a thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room..." The diction choice of "tomb" hints to the reader what he or she is soon to discover that this room is, in fact, a tomb for Homer Barron.

Thirdly, symbolism is a distinctive device used in this story. The "rose" in the title does not appear until the end of the story. The "rosy curtains" and "rosy lights" in her room represent her love and freedom. She is long suppressed by her father. A rose for her is also the author's sympathy for her.

4. Themes

The themes in "A Rose for Emily" are quite provoking. The theme of the gap between generations is clear in this story. Miss Emily is stuck in the time of Colonel Sartoris and his contemporaries. Her inability to adapt to change is demonstrated not only in her refusal to pay taxes after Colonel Sartoris remits them, but by her refusal to have a mailbox when free postal delivery becomes available to the town. "Thus she passed from generation to generation - dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." She remains in the past, however, a relic of a time forgotten. Her house, too, seems stuck in the past; when the aldermen call upon her to demand her taxes, they wait in the parlor "furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture," where "a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray." This theme is also demonstrated in Miss Emily's rare interactions with the outside world, when she gives china-painting lessons to "the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries"; when "the newer generation became the backbone and spirit of the town," the students stop coming.

The second theme is the gap between the world of the rich and that of the poor. In "A Rose for Emily," the Grierson family is seen as belonging to another world than that of the rest of the town. When the smell of death lingers around Miss Emily's house shortly after the disappearance of her sweetheart, the narrator (who is the voice of the town) sees it as "another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons."

The third one is the status of the old maid. In "A Rose for Emily," the narrator, who is the voice of the town, describes how the town people had resented the Griersons because they "held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such." So when Miss Emily reaches thirty and is still unmarried, they feel "not pleased exactly, but vindicated." After Miss Emily's father dies and leaves the house to

her, they are glad to pity her because "being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized."

5. Conclusion

In "A Rose for Emily," the narrator reports that "as soon as the old people said 'Poor Emily,' the whispering began... this behind their hands; rustling of craned silk and satin behind jalousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon as the thin, swift clop-clop-clop of the matched team passed: 'Poor Emily.'"

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