

Character Analysis of *A Rose For Emily*

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Abstract. William Faulkner is among the greatest experimentalists of the 20th century novelists. The 1950 Nobel Prize presentation speech calls Faulkner the “unrivaled master of all living British and American novelists”. *A Rose for Emily* is one of his best-known short stories and is widely used in English classroom. Some people regard the story as a reflection of the dying Old South and the growing New South, which is practical and bent on industrialization. Some read the story as an allegory. By the characterization of the heroine Miss Emily and with the use of symbols and images, we can understand the relationship between the South and the North, between the past and the present, illusion and reality, permanence and change, and death and life.

Introduction

William Faulkner (1897-1962) is a giant in the realm of American literature. More than simply a renowned Mississippi writer, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist and short story writer is acclaimed through the world as one of the twentieth century's greatest writers. During what is generally considered his period of greatest artistic achievement, from *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 to *Go Down, Moses* in 1942, Faulkner accomplished in a little over a decade more artistically than most writers accomplish over a lifetime of writing. His effective use of the stream of consciousness, multiple points of view, symbolism and imagery, place him among the rank of the greatest modern writers along with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Some short stories written by Faulkner were later incorporated into novels. “*A Rose for Emily*” is a classic story representing Faulkner's favorite subject matter, theme and style. Through the life of the heroine of the story, the author reveals the fate of the aristocracy and the new changes in the South of America after the Civil War.

The Background of the Story and the Main Plot Associated with It

Published in 1930, “*A Rose for Emily*” is one of the most widely read among Faulkner's short stories. The story took place in a mythical town that William Faulkner called Jefferson, Mississippi. The time of the story is during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the town was learning to live with South's loss in the Civil War of 1862—1865 and the consequent dismantling of the slavery-based society that had preceded it. The end of slavery, however, did not end white supremacy, nor in particular the social dominance of the prominent white families who, though small in number, had owned the largest plantations and the largest numbers of slaves. The status of upper class white womanhood in south slavery-based society was both superior and limited.

The wife of a plantation owner was raised up above ordinary womanhood so that she was treated with a chivalrous deference.

"*A Rose for Emily*" is one of Faulkner's most frequently anthologized short stories and is widely used in the American classroom. This story is narrated through a third person's point of view, told from the townspeople. Ms. Emily was sort of like a mystery to citizens of the town. When Ms. Emily was younger, her deceased father used to force away all the young men that were in love with her. The summer after her father's death, she fell in love with a Yankee by the name of Homer Barron. Everyone in the town was whispering about their relationship and wondering if they were married. After a while they stop seeing Homer and decided that they got married. The townspeople then proceeds by saying that Ms. Emily then died a while after. They didn't know she was sick. After they buried her, they went to see upon the room. When they opened the room they were greeted by great amounts of dust. They also saw a man's collar, tie, suit, shoes, and discarded socks. "Then shockingly, lying right there in the bed was the man..., a long strand of iron-gray hair." (Faulkner, 1990)

The Characterization of Miss Emily Was Portrayed in the Story.

Through telling this story and exploring the character of Miss Emily, Faulkner reveals his ambivalent relationship to the South, of which he felt proud and ashamed at the same time. Miss Emily's personality was warped with which the author shares sympathy to her.

Miss Emily Was Proud, Self-important and Obstinate.

Born into an aristocratic family of the South, Miss Emily was proud, self-important and obstinate like the other Griersons. As a lady from such a family she enjoyed a high but obsolete social status. On the one hand she was placed on a pedestal for people to admire as if she were perfect. She was closely watched by the community and was always expected to bring honor to the town and set a good example for the young. She was viewed as a representative of the Southern tradition, "an idol in the niche" (Faulkner, 1990). Dominated by her father, she was robbed of all opportunities for a happy marriage and thus for a normal woman's life. So when her father died, she was still single at the age of 30. After she began to court with Homer Barron, a Northern laborer, she was accused of being a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. The patriarchal and social pressure warped her character. She tried hard to cling to the past, which meant privilege and glory to her. She cut herself off from the changing world and lived in complete self-isolation. Over the years, she was transformed from a subordinate young lady controlled by her domineering father to a middle-aged woman courting a laborer against the accusations of the community and then to a murderer who not only killed her lover but also kept the corpse in her house and even sometimes lay down beside the remains of the dead body. For such a woman, the townspeople had mixed feelings---she was "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse" (Faulkner, 1990). For better or worse, she is the embodiment of the social conditions at that time.

Miss Emily Is a Woman of Firm Will and Strong Character.

Miss Emily lives by clinging to her conviction and she ignores successfully in her life all the testimony of her senses. She refuses to pay the taxes because she is convinced that Colonel Sartoris is still alive. She refuses to bury her father because she believes

that he is not dead. She accepts the advances of Homer Barron perhaps because she thinks he truly loves her. She kills Homer Barron maybe because she judges it the best way to ensure a faithful and lasting marriage. And she sleeps beside the dead Barron because to her he is still living.

The author uses four adjectives—“dear, inescapable, impervious, and tranquil” (Faulkner, 1990) to describe how the townspeople felt about Miss Emily. These words are precise, but these are usual adjectives that don’t fit comfortably together. They reflected the townspeople’s ambivalent attitude toward Emily. She was dear because she represented the Southern heritage to a certain extent. She was capable because she was “a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” (Faulkner). She was impervious and not affected by any changes taking place in the town, and her imperviousness was well reflected by her ignoring the tax notice and her refusal to pay taxes. She was tranquil. Though she was tragic, she remained calm and free from disturbance. Her tranquility as well as rigidity was portrayed by her motionless silhouette in the window. She was certainly perverse, always behaving in an unreasonable way and regularly doing the opposite of what people expected her to do.

The Symbols Used in Portraying the Heroine

In the story, Faulkner employs symbols and images to depict the character of Miss Emily. Meanwhile, it poses a hard job for readers. It’s like working at a puzzle: when we start to figure it out, it will become more and more interesting. The following are major symbols and images used by Faulkner.

Rose

The meaning of the title “A Rose for Emily” is ambiguous, full of symbolic meanings, capable of various interpretations. A rose is a cliché symbolizing love and a pledge of faithfulness. From the story, we can see Miss Emily was denied love. So, in this sense, the title has an ironic meaning. In one way, Miss Emily is closely related to the image of rose. When she was young, she was a slender figure in white, courted by many young men. She herself is fond of rose, as her valance curtains are of rose color and her lights are rose-shaped. In another way, a rose is a gift to a loved one, and the whole story is the narrator’s or Faulkner’s tribute to Emily, and also to the Old South, of which Miss Emily is the symbol. A rose for somebody can also mean a kind of memorial, an offering, in memory of somebody. Faulkner was once directly asked the meaning of the title and replied: O it’s simply the poor woman had had no life at all. Her father had kept her more or less locked up and then she had a lover who was about to quit her, she had to murder him. It was just “A Rose for Emily” –that’s all.

House

Miss Emily’s house was built in the 1870s after the end of the Civil War. Compared with houses of the Greek revival style with columns built before the war like those we see in the movie “Gone with the Wind”, this gothic revival style was fancy, frivolous, and not very solemn-looking. With time went on, the whole street was becoming modern and commercial, only Miss Emily’s house remained the same. Although her house was decaying, it still assumed an air of a stubborn and frivolous girl. Her house was old, in decay, pretentious, and completely out of place, was more unpleasant to look at. So the author personifies Miss Emily’s house by using words like “lifting its

stubborn and coquettish decay” (Faulkner, 1990). This symbolizes that the house and its owner share the same character.

Gold Chain and Gold Head of an Ebony Cane

Miss Emily is being described as a dead person, drowned, bloated and pale. Both the house and the owner are in decay. Shutting her herself from the outside world and living in complete self-isolation, Miss Emily seemed like a living corpse. Also, there are some descriptions of her gold chain and gold head of an ebony cane. Gilt and gold suggest wealth. To tarnish means to lose luster, to discolor, to grow dull. This word “tarnish”(Faulkner, 1990) can also mean to besmirch or sully a reputation, or honor, etc. The repeated use of the word underlines the fact that the Grierson family used to be rich and august but now it has lost its splendor.

Watch

In the story, there is a description of Miss Emily’s watch, “with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt” (Faulkner)—the fact that it vanished into her belt means that the watch was hidden under her belt and therefore invisible. In the story, the narrator tells us, “Then they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain.”(Faulkner) The watch has a symbolic meaning. If the watch vanished into her belt, that means she did not look at the watch. The watch is a symbol of time. In his novel “*The sound and the Fury*”, Faulkner also uses watches and clocks as symbols of time. Just as one of the characters in that novel trying to smash a watch to stop the time, Miss Emily, by making her watch invisible, tried to ignore the passage of time as well as any changes brought about by the passage of time.

Short hair

After Miss Emily’s father was taken away for burial, Miss Emily appeared with short hair. The symbolic meaning of her short hair is rather ambiguous. It can also indicate that with her hair cut short, Emily was now a liberated woman. She was determined to change her role as an upper-class genteel lady. A short hair usually makes a woman look stronger and more independent in character. This quality of hers can be seen in courting with Homer Barron, a Yankee foreman, despite traditional social prejudice.

Miss Emily

Miss Emily had lived a long life and had become a tradition because she represented the aristocracy of the Old South that had lost out in the Civil War. She was a care because she was old, unmarried, and without family, and the people in the town felt they must take care of her. They felt that taking care of her was their duty and obligation. And this obligation passed from generation to generation as long as she lived.

The Images Used in Portraying the Heroine

There are some images of Miss Emily in this story, Faulkner portrays her in such a way and these images change over the passage of time.

The first image is: “As they re-crossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol.”(Faulkner, 1990)

This is one of the vivid images of Miss Emily the author creates in the story. Here Miss Emily sat in the window with the light behind her. What people could see was her silhouette, a dark figure seen against a light background. The fact that she was

motionless suited her rigid and stubborn personality. In this image she didn't look like a living person but an idol, or a goddess.

The second image is: "We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door." (Faulkner)

This depicts a central image that tells several things about the relationship between father and daughter in the Grierson family. First, the positions of the father and daughter are meaningful. The father was standing in the foreground while Miss Emily was standing in the background. This shows the father's dominant position and the daughter's subordinate role. The father's spraddling adds to his image as a stern patriarchal figure. Second, the father turned his back to her. This shows he refused to listen to her, denying her wishes. Then Mr. Grierson was clutching a horsewhip, which is clearly a symbol of power, authority, and strict control. Miss Emily's slender figure suggests vulnerability. And her white dress symbolizes purity. The most valued quality of the Southern white women. The fact that the two of them were framed by the back-flung front door may be interpreted in different ways. One interpretation is that the father was blocking the door, suggesting Miss Emily was unable to walk out of the house and choose her suitor freely. Another interpretation is that the door was open for suitors but intends to imply many meanings with this image.

The third image is: "When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows- sort of tragic and serene." (Faulkner)

The images in this passage reveal a woman stripped of her sexuality. In this portrait, Emily assumes the semblance of a girl of a sexually mature woman of thirty. Her cut hair is especially important. Since ancient times, a woman's hair has symbolized her sexuality. Emily's hair, also along with her sexuality, has been cut short through her father's pride. The cut hair also introduces religious imagery, for an initiate into a nunnery envisage a Madonna, a holy virgin, as an addendum to the primary image of angels who, although often depicted as women, are asexual.

"Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows – she had evidently shut up the top of the house-like the carved torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which." (Faulkner)

Sitting in the window, Miss Emily looked like the carved torso of an idol for worship placed in a niche. Whether she was looking or not looking at us we could not tell and it was not important because she had ceased to be a real human being, but had completely become a sort of monument, a symbol of a tradition and hereditary obligation.

Conclusions

Thematically, "*A Rose for Emily*" is a very rich and complicated story. Through the depiction of the character- Miss Emily, we can see the plot of the story evolve around many conflicts – the conflict between Mr. Grierson and his daughter, the conflict between Miss Emily and Homer Barron, the conflict between Miss Emily and the community of the town, and the conflict between the past and the present. On a psychological level, the story explores the inner world of a human being, the main character's conflict with the established codes of conduct and her conflict with her own heart. By exploiting the "tricks" of vague references, ambiguities, symbolism, imagery and etc, Faulkner hopes to invite us readers to participate in the process of seeking the

truths of the inner life of the townspeople as they cope with Miss Emily. Faulkner is regarded as a “deep psychologist”(Minghan, 1997). The short story “A Rose for Emily” lives up to that high praise.

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