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Southern Literature

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Southern Gothicism in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" centers around Emily Grierson, a woman whom the town considers in life "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town," but in death "a fallen monument" (Faulkner). To understand what is meant by these, one must first know of the history behind the woman. Emily is raised in the town by her father, a man who keeps a strict hold over Emily until his death. Upon his demise, Emily momentarily loses touch with reality when she refuses to admit that her father is dead. The townspeople pity her, and in an attempt to ease her burden, the mayor at the time falsifies an account of debts to her father that allows Emily to remit her taxes. Eventually, she seems to move on from this tragedy of her father's death and ends up in a relationship with a man who has come into the town from the north- Homer Barron. Homer is the foreman of a construction crew, and the town, while at first happy for her, is eventually scandalized and contacts Emily's family. The town ends up regretting this decision, because, as they say, "the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been" (Faulkner). Homer eventually goes missing, presumed to have abandoned Emily to continue his perpetual state of bachelorhood, and Emily retreats into her home, only opening her doors to offer china-painting classes. Emily spends the rest of her life in this state of reclusion, with only the company of an African American man-servant. Once Emily dies, the town goes to empty her house. In a region of the

house they knew was unused, they were required to force open the door to see what was inside. There, Homer is discovered, or “What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust” (Faulkner). They also find “that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head,” and on top of that pillow, “a long strand of iron-gray hair” (Faulkner). This shows that not only had Homer been murdered, but that Emily had been intimate with his body. The inherent lean of this story towards Southern Gothic is apparent, demonstrated in the themes of delusional characters, female entrapment, violence, and setting. Faulkner uses the tradition of Southern Gothic to emphasize both the innate horror of many long-standing southern customs and the horror of the “gross, teeming world of the New South” (Stone 438) in order to underline the danger of stagnation and the need for continual change.

Gothic literature focuses on “sensational and supernatural occurrences”, and its “principal aim [is] to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery, cruelty, and a variety of horror” (Harold 1). Southern Gothic tradition parallels this closely, and “uses the macabre or the supernatural to shock or examine cultural values or expectations” (Harold 2). Faulkner uses these techniques in all of his works, and they are manifested in “A Rose for Emily” in many different ways. Emily’s house demonstrates Gothic setting. Her family and the town establish the convention of female entrapment, which contributes to (and possibly even causes) Emily’s status as a delusional character. Violence is demonstrated in the eventual murder of her lover. However, Faulkner’s use of these techniques is anything but accidental. Keech demonstrates this when he writes about Faulkner “artistically using the Gothic to capitalize upon a stock

response that metaphorically emphasizes the innate horror underlying certain aspects of southern tradition” (140), and each of these topics will be further discussed in detail to understand why they were used.

Emily’s house is described as “a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seven ties, . . . lifting up its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores” (Faulkner). There are a number of things to unpack in this description, the first being the general sense of disrepair. The house is an “eyesore,” and while decay is a common theme in all Gothic stories, in Southern Gothicism it takes on special significance as it “symbolizes the past with its out-worn traditions” (Harold 1). Keech says that specifically in Faulkner’s works, “the atmosphere of romantic decay... thematically conveys the sense of decline of the South’s vanished glory, implying the need for the region to recognize... and to accept a new culture based on new values.” (Keech 140). Therefore, Faulkner uses the house to represent the past and how it is deteriorating. However, as Stone points out, the house is an “eyesore among eyesores” (Faulkner). Faulkner takes care to point out that the house is surrounded by modernity- gas pumps and cotton wagons- which he also considers unsightly. This seems to suggest that the narrator is as disillusioned with the New South as they are with the old- finding it nearly impossible to choose between “the testy young [man] who does not recognize old ways and the crusty old [man] who does not recognize new ones” (Stone 438). Faulkner’s dissatisfaction with the old South as well as the new suggests that he believes that the region still has a long way to go before a successful society can be obtained. Continuous change, therefore, is inevitable and necessary.

The Gothic Tradition of female entrapment is a factor in Emily's life from the very beginning of it. While Emily is never physically held hostage, her family and the town ensure both a psychological and a financial entrapment is in place. Her father "[keeps] her single until she [is] over 30, by standing in the doorway... with a horsewhip in his fist," and "after his death, the townspeople took over her father's role" (Dilworth 254). By ensuring that Emily remains single, her father simultaneously ensures that she remains entirely dependent upon him, which creates a "sense of betrayal" (Burns 108) for Emily when he dies and leaves her with nothing but the house. The narrator states it outright when he(or she) explains that the townspeople "remember all the young men her father had driven away, and... knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will" (Faulkner). The townspeople continue this course by exempting her from her taxes, which "marks her inability to understand or control her business affairs, the limitation of her sex," leaving Emily "no option of financial self-sufficiency" (Burns 110). Financial dependence is enough of a trap in itself, but Emily suffers from a different kind of noose as well. Not only does she lack the ability to control her financial wellbeing, but she is forced into "a life of solitude owing to denial of natural sexual affection" (Dilworth 254). Even when she eventually finds a form of companionship in Homer, the townspeople are quick to bring an end to it when they decide that it does not meet their societal expectations. The women "whisper... behind their hands" (Faulkner) at her relationship with Homer, and this scandal is what eventually causes the townsfolk to contact her relatives. While it is impossible to say for sure if this tight control is what eventually caused Emily's delusions, it is easy to see how complete dependence coupled with almost complete isolation could incite a certain amount of neurosis. While this may seem

terrible, it was truly a symptom of the attitude in the South towards women. To a degree, Emily's circumstances are directly tied to her womanhood- at least the financial dependence she was subjected to would not have been an issue had she been a man with a way of earning a livelihood. The narrator even says of the mayor's scheme for her tax remittance that "only a woman could have believed it" (Faulkner). This is an example of toxic ideals from Southern society that needed to be moved on from and changed- much like racial inequality, the oppression of women in things like the ability to provide for themselves and choose their life paths for themselves was toxic and preventing growth. Holding onto outdated principles such as this only resulted in stagnation and rot.

Violence is perhaps the most well-known characteristic of Gothic literature in general, Southern Gothicism. It is exhibited most clearly in Emily's murder of Homer, which seeks to establish the consequence for stifling change. As Keech says, "what they [Faulkner's works] did bequeath was ... ruthlessness with the hypocritical mask of aristocracy finally fallen away" (Keech 92). This is an excellent description of the conclusion of the story, as the 'superior' family bloodlines and money that Emily boasts of are not enough to have prevented her from doing something seen as completely uncivilized and perhaps even savage- the murder of her lover, and the necrophilia that ensues. However, this is not simply an act of violence; it is an act of control. Emily again and again proves herself to be completely resistant to change. She denies the obvious death of her father. She rejects the town's request to pay her taxes, referring them to the mayor who made the exemption in the first place- a man who has been dead for years. The murder of Homer is simply Emily staying true to form. Much like the south, she is "petrified in a morbid backward glance at the holocaust consuming a dead people" (Beck

83). Homer, however, is a Yankee, and therein associated with the North. The arrival of Homer represents “change wrought on American life by technology that resulted in the paving of small town sidewalks and streets” (Stone 434). Therefore, by killing Homer, she is metaphorically killing progress and change itself. By staying in her decaying house with her decaying lover, she becomes a “hero who, fortifying [her]self in an anachronistic, essentially horrible, and yet majestic stronghold, ignores or defies the insistent encroachments of time and progress” (Stone 434). Through the shock and horror of Homer’s decomposing body (and of Emily’s interaction with it), Faulkner shows the horror and danger inherent in clinging to something ‘dead’, whether that be a person or a system of beliefs that is harmful and outdated.

Faulkner knew the danger of becoming complacent with society and its problems. Older forms of thinking certainly have their issues- and rather large ones. However, that should not blind one into thinking that current issues have no standing. That is why this story is still relevant. While the age of the antebellum period had serious social issues, so too did the postbellum period, and so too does today’s society. Because perfection is unobtainable, change is always necessary to help society keep moving towards something better- otherwise, there is the danger of becoming Emily. Clinging blindly to ideas presents the probability of holding onto something that is not only putrid and decayed, but lifeless and meaningless.

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