

Analysis of the Changing Portraits in "A Rose for Emily"

ANALYSE DU PORTRAIT CHANGEANT DANS L'UNE ROSE POUR EMILY

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Abstract: In his renowned short story, *A Rose for Emily*, the master artist William Faulkner verbally paints the portraits of a tragic woman, Miss Emily. Throughout this story, Faulkner creates numerous figurative portraits of Emily, and makes her physical appearance change dramatically. The description of Emily's changing physical appearance in different periods enables the readers to watch how Emily transforms from a slender lady to an old gloomy "bloated" one, and from an obedient, genteel young girl to a murderer and corpse keeper. This paper just aims to unveil Emily's interior complexity and internal changes through the analysis of her external changes and at the same time attempts to explore the causes for her changes.

Key words: William Faulkner, *A Rose for Emily*, changing portrait, causes, analysis

Résumé: Dans cette nouvelle renommée, *Une Rose pour Emily*, la maître artistique William Faulkner décrit verbalement le portrait d'une femme tragique, Mlle Emily, et fait changer son apparence physique dramatiquement. La description de l'apparence changeante d'Emily dans de différentes périodes permet aux lecteurs de voir comment Emily se transforme d'une demoiselle splendide en une vieille figure morne et arrogante, et d'une jeune fille obéissante et gentille en meurtrière et garde des cadavres. L'article présent vise à mettre en lumière la complexité intérieure d'Emily et ses mutations internes à travers l'analyse de ses changements externes et essaie, en même temps, d'explorer les causes de ses transformations.

Mots-Clés: William Faulkner, *Une Rose pour Emily*, portrait changeant, causes, analyse

William Faulkner is a towering figure in American literature during the first half of the 20th century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. In his acceptance speech he stated that it was the writer's duty to "help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past."² This approach to writing is certainly reflected in his work. Born in 1897, during the post-Civil War era of the South, his literary work captivates the emotional transition faced by southerners as they emerged from an era gone-by to a new, more modern period. The characters he creates exemplify the conflict that was embedded deep within the human spirit of southerners who lived in this changing society. Reading Faulkner's novels and short stories allow today's society to take a step back in time and capture a glimpse of one of the most evolutionary periods in American society.

Using the decay and corruption of the South after the American Civil War as a background, William Faulkner produced his famous short story *A Rose for Emily*,

which recounts the story of an eccentric southern spinster, Emily Grierson. Emily was born in an old southern aristocratic family, whose life was strictly controlled by her father. When she was young, she had many suitors, but according to her father none was suitable enough. During the time in which her father was alive, Emily was seen as a figure to be admired but never touched and she was revered as a goddess in the townspeople's eyes. When her father passed away, it was a devastating loss for Emily. Never being able to develop any real relationship with anyone else, it was like her world completely crumbled around her. Emily tried to hold on to his body and didn't permit anyone to bury his body. Although this was a sad moment for Emily, it was in a sense liberating. Emily set out to fulfill her desires of finding love and living her own life. She still held her head high in the tradition of her heritage until she met the man of her dreams, Homer Barron, a laborer from the north. But when she later realized that Homer was not serious about love and even threatened to leave her, she was seen buying arsenic, which the townspeople believed she would commit suicide with. After this, Homer Barron was not heard from again, and was assumed to have returned north. Though she did not commit suicide, the townspeople of Jefferson continued to gossip about her and her eccentricities, citing her family's history of mental illness. She rarely left her home and was heard from less

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² X.J.Kennedy, *An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, P.403, Little, Brown and Company, Boston. Toronto

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and less. For the townspeople, she was very proud, odd and mysterious. No one knew how her life was exactly like. So after she died, the whole town went to her house because of curiosity, where in the bed of one room they found Homer's corpse and they also noticed Emily's hair in the pillow.

For many readers, this story is very horrible, and even a little disgusting, but they also showed great interest because of its suspending plot, special way of narration and complex structure. In the course of the story, Emily's appearance changes dramatically. In addition to the literal portrait of Emily's father, Faulkner creates numerous figurative portraits of Emily herself by framing her in doorways or windows. The chronological organization of Emily's portraits visually imprints the changes occurring throughout her life. In reflection, one will think of the different phases the character undergoes through her life. This paper first demonstrates Emily's change of physical appearance and the worsening of her mental state and then attempts to analyze the causes for her internal and external change.

In the beginning of the tale, Miss Emily is described as "a slender figure in white"³ which is typical of the virginal quality young women are expected to have at the time. Just through these few words, Emily's youth image can be visualized by the readers: pure, innocent, slim or maybe quite beautiful because later it was said that she had many suitors. However, the father, "a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip",⁴ is a menacing dark image assuming the dominant front position. His turned back suggested his disregard for Emily's emotional welfare and his horsewhip implied his authority and seriousness. With the horsewhip, he strictly controlled Emily and also drove away all Emily's admirers. The portrait of these two persons also gives the readers infinite imaginations about the youth Emily. As an unmarried girl, as an adolescent, she is shown with excessive pride, but imagination does permit the readers to consider her as any young child—easily manipulative. As any child before the strict and serious father, Emily was very obedient and reserved. Besides she also showed the utmost respect for her father, as could be seen in the following excerpt "So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly..."⁵ Although this does not state and show her obedience bluntly, as it does imply that although she had wonderful suitors and her father sent them away, she did nothing to stop it. Clearly she was an acquiescent child.

Emily is a woman who for her entire life, was cared for by her father who never gave her the freedom to

become her own person. Her father, the dominant patriarch, robbed her of a husband and that part of a female's existence that can find fulfillment only through marriage. For Emily, she was used to such kind of life and greatly dependent on her father spiritually. So when her father had passed away, she was unable to survive, civilly, on her own. As a result, she kept herself in seclusion, refusing to adapt to the changing environment that surrounded her. Even after his death, Emily's father played a huge role in her life. The crayon portrait of her father, which appears repeatedly in the story, symbolizes his continued presence of him in her life. Emily was a woman whose repressed adult life left no room for her to grow and bloom like a rose. Her life was pale and shade-less. Faulkner writes, "A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured".⁶ Because of her shaded life she had growing up, always being in the shadow of her father, Emily never realized that the changing world around her might actually benefit her life. "The newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town",⁷ but Emily never gave herself the chance to realize this.

Her father's influence on Emily is tremendous. As the narrator puts, "that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die." At last in Emily's funeral, the "crayon portrait" of her father is "musing profoundly above the bier", which also indicates the deep influence on Emily's life.

To some extent, Emily's father is the source of causing her tragic story at her early age and still shadows her for the rest of her life. Emily not only clings to her father's memory, but also becomes the representative of the old moral values that are deeprooted in her mind under her father's long influence. After the death of her father, Emily's appearance changed dramatically. "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".⁸ This depicted Miss Emily's obvious lack of sexuality, in contrast to what might have been expected from a young woman of thirty years of age. In this portrait, Emily assumed the semblance of a girl instead 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, along with her sexuality, had been cut short through her

³ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P.123 New York: Vintage, 1977

⁴ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P.123 New York: Vintage, 1977

⁵ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P.122, P.125, P124, New York: Vintage, 1977

⁶ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P.122, P.125, P124, New York: Vintage, 1977

⁷ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P.122, P.125, P124, New York: Vintage, 1977

⁸ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P124, P123, P130, New York: Vintage, 1977

father's pride. The cut hair also introduces religious imagery, for an initiate into a nunnery shears her hair as a symbol of her chastity. In addition, the adjectives "tragic and serene" envisage a Madonna, a holy virgin, as an addendum to the primary image of angels who, although often depicted as women, are asexual. But her cut hair was also a sign for her will to break away from her father's control. For the first time in her life she felt free even though she was already thirty years old. With this restraint being cut and this new found freedom, she attempted to begin a new life.

Later Emily fell into love with the day-labor Homer, "a Yankee—a big, dark and ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face". But unexpectedly, he did not want to marry him. Her lover's background was totally different from her. He represented the new-born class and culture of the North—traveling around, experiencing a lot, enjoying timely, having good relations and being irresponsible. He sought for private interest yet lacked moral disciplines. He was not serious about love and just flirted. Homer Barron, was a typical character who carries the kind of Bourgeois moral values. The features of him were exactly the features of industrial times. For Miss Emily — a representative of the old moral values, Homer's moral values were incompatible to hers, which predestined that they could not be together. The reconciliation of the two social classes and systems foreshadowed the extreme and sorrowful ending of the two persons. When Homer later deserted her, she was deeply hurt and as a lady of noble birth, she couldn't bear this insult. The conflict between them developed, and finally developed to the degree of climax—she killed him. After she kills Homer Barron, the picture of Emily framed by the upstairs window became an inversion of her youthful portrait: "a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her".⁹ With the light behind her, Emily became the dark silhouette of her father in the dominant foreground. Since nightshirts were white, Homer Barron, wearing his nightshirt,¹⁰ was the inversion of the pure virgin—a decaying corpse hovering in the background, passive and eternally subordinate. This inverted portrait suggested that Emily established her dominance with this act of murder. After the death of her Homer, "she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray".¹¹ In the following years, when the townspeople saw Miss Emily, "her hair grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper and salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning".¹² From this, it is seen that Emily must have gone through bitter sufferings which resulted in her quick change of

hair.

Later, the shift from an upstairs window frame to a downstairs one is significant even though the descriptions of Emily in both portraits are similar. In both she is a torso of an idol: upstairs, her "upright torso" was "motionless as that of an idol";¹³ downstairs, she was "like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which".¹⁴ The rigid torso in both portraits personified Emily, adhering stubbornly to her "noblesse oblige." The latter portrait, however, was downstairs. In aristocracy, the upstairs connoted private life as opposed to public life displayed downstairs. Emily had shut off the top floor—or her private life—and allowed the townspeople to view only her public image. Just as an idol occupied its nook in a wall, Emily continued to occupy her niche as the last Grierson. Whether or not Emily looked at the townspeople was inconsequential, for an idol did not mingle with the masses.

The final portrait of Emily as an old woman, framed in the doorway while discussing her taxes, contrasted sharply with the portrait of her youth: "They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked 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 . . . Then they could hear the invisible ticking at the end of the gold chain . . . Her voice was dry and cold". No longer slender, this small, fat woman presented an incongruous image as her obesity overwhelmed her small, spare frame. The virginal girl had been overwhelmed with life. The overall image, however, was one of dominance and death. Emily now wore black instead of white. Black, with its traditional suggestion of evil, also visually transferred dominance in this scene. Certainly, she controlled this situation instead of the Aldermen. But the images of death emerged most frequently: her pallid complexion; her drowned, bloated body; her lost eyes; and the cold, dry voice of the tomb. Not only had Emily been living with death literally in the form of Homer's corpse, but something essential had died within her.

For Emily, time and its inescapable changes had died. The watch had vanished invisibly into her belt, and her body had figuratively drowned in the motionless waters that connoted stagnant time. Time, for Emily, was no longer a "mathematical progression". She had locked herself away from all change inherent in the passage of

⁹ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P124, P123, P130, New York: Vintage, 1977

¹⁰ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P124, P123, P130, New York: Vintage, 1977

¹¹ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P130, P130, P123, P 128, New York: Vintage, 1977

¹² Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P130, P130, P123, P 128, New York: Vintage, 1977

¹³ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P130, P130, P123, P 128, New York: Vintage, 1977

¹⁴ Hereafter CS: Collected Stories of William Faulkner, P130, P130, P123, P 128, New York: Vintage, 1977

time. She refused the outward vestiges of progress, such as metal numbers above her door—a subtle reference to mathematical progression—or a mailbox—a visual representation of the communication she had severed. She even settled the issue of taxes by telling the Aldermen to consult Colonel Sartoris, who had been dead nearly ten years. Instead, time had become a "huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches". As a meadow, all time, past and present, merged into one, and change ceased to exist. Since "no winter ever quite touches" it, this merging allowed Emily to control the pain of loss—the loss of her father, to whom she clung; physical and emotional love; and the normal aspects of a woman's life. Perhaps this distortion of time ultimately allowed her to sleep with the corpse of her lover as if she were sleeping with the living man. As seen in this portrait, however, the final effect was that Emily herself became, figuratively, a living corpse.

After Emily's burial, people investigated her house and opened a room that no one had seen in forty years. They forced to open the door and discovered that on the bed lay a dead corpse, known to be Homer Barron. And on the pillow beside him they "saw a long strand of iron-gray hair". This just the echoed the preceding description of her hair and implied that it was just Emily who killed Homer, kept his body and even slept beside his corpse for many years.

The chronological portraits mirror the frozen images of Emily that linger in the minds of the townspeople, the collective narrator. Through the description of Emily's changing physical appearance, the writer Faulkner demonstrates how Emily was transformed from a slender lady to an old bloated spinster and at the same time he also implied the causes for her mental changes from a young normal lady full of dreams to a horrible grotesque. Through Emily's whole life, the author also explores all levels of society, from the plantation owners and their descendants, to the poor whites and to the Yankees. He exposes the conflicts between generations, classes, races, man and his environment, man and himself. Taken together, what emerges is not just the social and economic history of Yoknapatawpha County, but its emotional and psychological history as well. Miss Emily is the monument of the South. Her story truly reflects the tragedy of the fallen aristocrats as well as the cruel reality of the South after the Civil War. The complex relationships between Emily and the generation of the old as well as the new show that people have strong mental conflicts when they are accepting advance and rejecting the tradition. In this sense, this work reveals the truth that the progress of society is the interaction between past and now, new and old, fantasy and reality, life and death, change and eternity.

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