

Emily as a Victim in “A Rose for Emily”

This paper argues that Emily Grierson has not been presented as a murderer, rather as a victim in William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”. As the plot unravels, we come to realize that she has been first oppressed by her father and then by the town and its people. The events of the story have been arranged in such a way that the reader feels sympathetic towards the protagonist despite the revelation of her being a murderer.

Even before the story begins, the title gives a hint that this story is an offering, a kind of tribute to her. “The title suggests that the story is an expression of affection and mourning, as well as a tribute, for Emily – despite her bizarre behavior” (Meyer 99).

The plot starts with the mention of her death. And the very first sentence reflects how Emily had been seen by the town people. The whole town goes to her funeral: “the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house... (Faulkner 81)” But nobody goes for her. Her death is of no concern to the “whole town”. This apathy towards her creates sympathy for Emily from the very beginning in the mind of the readers.

As the story progresses, we come to realize that when she is thirty, she is still single and the town people are contended with it: “So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased but vindicated...” Then, when her father dies and people come to know that the house was all that was left to her, people are “glad” (Faulkner 84). They do not have any affection towards her rather they are happy that “at last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, a pauper, she had become humanized” (Faulkner 84).

The narrator frequently uses the words like “poor” “tragic” and “serene” to address Emily, not out of sympathy but out of jealousy in cathartic tone. Emily, even when all alone has

certain dignity about her, a sense of pride of her own self and this is what bugs the town people. They are not just jealous about her high birth and aristocratic origin but also because of her dignified life and never to surrender attitude as in the case of taxpaying and installing the mail box. She defies the social conventions and this is what the society cannot tolerate about her. This is the reason the society is always scrutinizing her and criticizing her, generation after generation. “The town it is evident, has made Emily its obsession, with every detail of her life subject to discussion, speculation and assessment” (Klein 707).

When she starts dating Homer Baron, they gossip that she wouldn't think seriously about him because of their class difference. But when Emily and Homer continue their courtship, they comment “even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige” (Faulkner 84). She is never left alone. They are always critical about her. When she behaves according to her class and even when they think she doesn't: “She carried her head high enough – even when we believed that she was fallen” (85). She isn't free to live life on her own terms; she has to pass through their judgment. They even go on to the extreme to call on her relative. They term her personal relation “as a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people” (Faulkner 86). In this regard, Judith Fetterley mentions:

She is the object of incessant attentions; her every act is immediately consumed by the town for gossip and seized on to justify their interference in her affairs. Her private life becomes a public document that the town folk feel free to interpret at will and they are alternately curious, jealous, spiteful, pitying, partisan, proud, disapproving, admiring and vindicated (697).

When she buys the rat poison, they expect her to kill herself. “She will kill herself”; and we said it would be the best thing” (Faulkner 85). But when she doesn't, even then they don't

leave her. They comment: "...as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die." First Emily was oppressed by her father, chasing away all the suitors that had come for her, then by the society, the town people who envy her who leave no instance to comment upon her, from generation to generation as "dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil and perverse" (Faulkner 87). Even after her death, her life isn't private. They invade her privacy, forcing down her door that she had securely locked for so many years. Tony Groulx mentions "the narrator's account of their pettiness, jealousy and inability to make sense of Emily causes the reader to sympathize with Emily's eccentricities before we must judge her murderous behavior" (1609).

The events are placed in such an order that they create a sense of pity towards Emily. Thomas Klein argues "...its effect derives especially from two features: the story's complex chronology and the unusual voice of the narrator. The cause-and-effect relationship among these events is a bit slippery but the effect is to suspend judgment of Emily" (701). The paragraph that tells about the death of Homer starts with the description of the room as a "bridal", with the newly bought furniture and dresses. This creates an emotional effect upon readers. Then at the end when the iron gray hair is mentioned, it outdoes the details of the gruesome murder. It overshadows her crime and arouses pity for a lifelong lonely creature who sleeps with her dead lover.

Even Faulkner himself doesn't blame her: "Oh, 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". He further expresses "I pitied her and this was a salute, just as if you were to make a gesture, a salute, to anyone; to a woman you would hand a rose, as you would lift a cup of sake to a man" (Kirsznar and Mandell 89).

Emily's story has not been told by a relative or a friend but by the very people who look at her with envy. The narrative voice of "we" and the plot shows how she had been under their inspection throughout her life as a helpless being who could not stop them from peeking into her life and talking about her. The story is not about she kills a man or how she does it, but about why. And the juxtaposition of the events in the plot does not present her as a heartless murderer but as a pathetic loner who had to murder him in order to keep him with her so that she wouldn't be lonely anymore.



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